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### Rights of Passage: Immigrant Fiction, Religious Ritual, and the Politics of Liminality, 1899-1939

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Laura Patton Samal entitled "Rights of Passage: Immigrant Fiction, Religious Ritual, and the Politics of Liminality, 1899-1939." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Mary E. Papke, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Thomas Haddox, Carolyn R. Hodges, Charles Maland

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Rights of Passage: Immigrant Fiction, Religious Ritual, and the Politics of Liminality,  
1899-1939

A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Laura Patton Samal  
May 2008

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Sam Samal, to my children, Lucia and Julian Samal, and to the memories of my parents Miriam and Richard Patton, in grateful appreciation for their love, faith, and support, and for being models for me of what is best in humanity.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

The novels written by immigrants to the United States during the great wave of immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveal a preoccupation with religious ritual as a major means through which they depict the tensions and dynamics at work in the immigration experience and the confrontation with American culture. This dissertation establishes the significance of religious ritual in novels written by immigrants to the United States between 1899 and 1939, and delineates the important spiritual, social, and political functions such ritual served by way of its special properties. I argue that immigrant writers used ritual as a powerful hieroglyph by which to comment upon the complex connection between the religious, the ethnic, and the political in the life of the immigrant.

The challenges that immigrants faced in their daily lives were ripe to be worked out within the special mechanism of religious ritual. Immigrant life was one of physical hardship, in which the body was debased by racial prejudice, inhumane working conditions, and a squalid living environment, while the voice of the immigrant was often silenced by an inability to speak the dominant language. In addition, the religious immigrant, no matter what religion he or she practiced, confronted a society that challenged preconceived notions of the order of the cosmos and of the ultimate vertical and horizontal obligations of human beings in the world. Thus immigrants faced competing visions of redemption posed by other religions, Americanization, and the pursuit of material success. Immigrant writers continually compress the foregoing concerns into ritual moments in their novels. Ritual, which employs the body as a medium for the expression of religious truth and aesthetically orchestrates physical

movements and expressive use of the Word, conferred dignity on the immigrant body, gave voice to the immigrant soul, provided a context in which the immigrant could experience beauty within a poor and often ugly environment, and challenged the immigrant to choose between conflicting visions of redemption within American society.



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## Introduction

To enter into the fiction written by immigrants to the United States in the early 1900s is often to encounter scenes like the following: A Norwegian woman on a snow-swept prairie, obsessed with securing last rites for her neighbor, sends her husband to his death in a blizzard in search of a minister; an anguished young Jewish immigrant spends his first Passover in America alone among Gentiles, eating ritually unclean food in a Nebraska boarding house; a lonely Korean exile gazes at the trains rushing in and out of Grand Central Station and remembers the power and grace of his father's procession up the steps of a Confucian temple. These moments, taken from the novels of O.E. Rølvaag, Elias Tobenkin, and Younghill Kang, respectively, testify to the importance of religious ritual in the novels of immigrant writers. Again and again in these novels, the ritual moment serves as a special means of throwing the immigrant experience into high relief. Indeed, it becomes, as Werner Sollors says of American literature in general, the "coded hieroglyph of ethnic group life in the past and ethnic tensions in the present" (*Literature and Ethnicity* 649). This dissertation will establish the significance of religious ritual in novels written by immigrants to the United States between 1899 and 1939, and delineate the important spiritual, social, and political functions such ritual served by way of its special properties. I will argue that immigrant writers recognized the problematic nature of religious ritual in American life and used it as a powerful hieroglyph by which to comment upon the complex connection for the immigrant between the religious, the ethnic, and the political in the liminal space of America.

In 1988, religious historian Jay Dolan recognized the importance of immigrant religion for the study of American religious history, and called for the use of immigrant religion as a “wide angle lens” through which to analyze the American religious experience as a whole (“The Immigrants and Their Gods” 66); yet no comprehensive work specifically dedicated to immigrant religion by a single author yet exists. The immigrant religious experience has been documented as a part of larger historical surveys, such as the religious histories of the United States by Winthrop Hudson, Sydney Ahlstrom, and Martin E. Marty, the histories of immigration published in the mid-twentieth century, such as Marcus Lee Hansen’s *The Immigrant in American History* and Oscar Handlin’s *The Uprooted*, and in studies of particular ethnic groups, such as Odd Lovoll’s study of Norwegian immigrants, *The Promise of America*, and Irving Howe’s moving tribute to Jewish immigrants, *World of Our Fathers*. Jay Dolan’s *The American Catholic Experience* and Howard Sachar’s *A History of the Jews in America* are representative of full-length histories of particular religious groups, which also include some discussion of immigrant religion. Collections of essays, such as *Immigrant Religion and Urban America*, edited by R. Miller and T.D. Malek, and *The Immigrant Religious Experience*, edited by George Pozzetta, contain some notable shorter treatments of the immigrant religious experience, such as Timothy Smith’s important essay “Religion and Ethnicity in America,” but these works tend to isolate particular ethnic groups or religious groups for study rather than provide an overview of immigrant religion.

Furthermore, although the use of ritual is a salient feature of immigrant writing, no work exists to date on its critical importance in immigrant literature. While the body

of research is growing, little work has been specifically directed toward the importance of religion in immigrant fiction, and no work on ritual in immigrant fiction has been published to date. Much of the commentary on immigrant fiction treats religion as ancillary to ethnicity, even though ethnicity and religious experience have intertwined and mutually conditioned each other in America since the beginning, and continue to do so today. As the physical and cultural boundaries of the sacred and the profane continue to be debated in American life, it seems appropriate, even essential, to reexamine the ways in which ritual was used not only by immigrants but also by nativists and other groups to construct and experience the sacred in a nation in which the sacred and the profane were ineluctably and bewilderingly entangled. In addition, many of the novels chosen for this study have long been neglected. Some have not yet been translated into English. Voices and stories have gone unheard which deserve to be heard, stories which can help us as we struggle to disentangle the strands of the political, the ethnic, and the religious in contemporary America. If, as theologian Theodore Jennings has remarked, ritual serves the noetic function of helping us question and discover “the fitting or appropriate act,” then to understand how the multitude of newly arrived ethnic groups worked out their vision of this fitting act in the early years of the last century may lead us to understand better how to act fittingly toward each other in the new century.

### *I. The Context of Immigrant Ritual Practice*

This dissertation will make use of the studies cited above to elaborate and contextualize the use of religious ritual in immigrant novels within the broader context of immigrant religion. Timothy Smith, in the aforementioned “Religion and Ethnicity in America,” argues, citing Handlin and Hansen, that the experience of uprooting,

dislocation and loss endured by the masses of immigrants flowing into the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a “theologizing experience” that “intensified the psychological basis for theological reflection and ethno-religious commitment” (1175). The prevalence of ritual in immigrant novels bears witness to the truth of Smith’s claim and partially explains its presence in immigrant novels as a medium for working out the trials of this experience.

While all of the various ethnic groups migrated from societies that were in varying degrees ritualized—that is, the daily life of the community was marked by repetitive, formalized observances that made reference to the sacred in some way—and that experienced deeply troubling challenges to the possibilities of ritual practice in a secularized culture, *within* specific ethnic groups there were complex dialectics which influenced the particular responses of each group to the use of ritual. For example, within the Jewish community on the Lower East Side of New York City, the crowded streets and tenements were packed with Orthodox Jews, Reform Jews, Hasidic Jews, Zionists, Socialists, Anarchists, and proselytizing Christians, all of whom participated in the tensions involved in working out ritual practice. Although George Marsden suggests that Jews could still be Jews in America without religious observance, both Irving Howe and the Jewish novels themselves testify to the fact that, for many Jews, ritual observance was central to the maintenance of individual and collective Jewish identity. In the Jewish novels included in this study, the ritual moment becomes particularly intense for those Jews who either wanted or resisted assimilation because it often forced them to choose among competing and conflicting redemptive communities.

The challenges that immigrants faced in their daily lives were ripe to be worked out within the special mechanism of religious ritual. Immigrant life was one of physical hardship, in which the body was debased by racial prejudice and inhumane working conditions, often sequestered into crowded and dirty quarters where the immigrant soul received little gratification from the beauty of its surroundings, and the voice of the immigrant was silenced by the inability to speak the dominant language. Ritual, which employs the body as a medium of the expression of religious truth, aesthetically orchestrates physical movements and expressive use of the Word, conferred dignity on the immigrant body, gave voice to the immigrant soul, and provided a context in which the immigrant could experience beauty within a poor and often ugly environment. Immigrants were also frequently engaged in a conscious or unconscious process of mourning for a lost world even as they fought to survive in a new one. Ritual, through its strategies of fixity and periodicity, was an important means by which immigrants invoked the past and negotiated their relationships to it and to their ethnic groups.

In addition, the religious immigrant, no matter what religion he or she practiced, confronted a society that had developed its own array of civil religious rituals that all loyal Americans of the time were expected to perform. These competing understandings of the ultimate vertical and horizontal obligations of human beings in the world forced the immigrant to ask the fundamental questions of “Whom do I serve?” and “How?” This confrontation with multiple understandings of redemption in a plural society and how to achieve it was often compressed into the ritual moment, requiring the immigrant either to engage in ritual as a means of cultural resistance or, as was often the case with assimilated immigrants, to practice it with discomfort and a longing for the time in which

they could once again engage in ritual as part of their ethnic group without ambivalence. In the various chapters of this dissertation, I will argue, then, that immigrant writers used religious ritual for multiple purposes: to confer dignity upon the immigrant body by making it the locus and crucible of religious truth; to construct and interrogate the boundaries of immigrant place within American space; and to create an arena in which the immigrant's struggle for language and the ownership of the Word could be worked out, in which beauty could be experienced and the politics of aesthetics could be questioned, and in which they could explore and critique competing visions of redemption in American culture.

Werner Sollors has remarked that "[t]he achievement of a Christian and American selfhood was always part of the struggle against a heathenish, ethnic 'otherness'" ("Literature and Ethnicity" 654). This study is based upon the premise that religious ritual was problematic for immigrants, not only because it was the icon of this "heathenish, ethnic 'otherness,'" but also because its very properties often conflicted with the dominant ethos of the time. Indeed, immigrant writers seem to have recognized that ritual practice, which appears to preserve the codes of the past, to subordinate the individual religious conscience to the collective and to religious hierarchy, to privilege body and symbol over spirit and Word, and to reinforce cultural boundaries, was a stone that could trouble the living stream of American Anglo-Protestantism, nationalism, progressivism, individualism, and spontaneity. Mark Twain's description of his encounter with the healing rituals of the Turkish dervishes in *Innocents Abroad*, written at the beginning of the major period of immigration to America, encapsulates this view. His account first describes the silent movements of the dervishes in almost poetic terms:

“They made no noise of any kind, and most of them tilted their heads back and closed their eyes, entranced with a sort of devotional ecstasy.” But what appears to be a sort of fascination is quickly undercut by American pragmatism, skepticism, and racial stereotyping: “It was about as barbarous an exhibition as we have witnessed yet [. . .] This is well enough for a people who think all their affairs are made or marred by viewless spirits of the air—by giants, gnomes, and genii—and who still believe, to this day, all the wild tales of the Arabian Nights” (387). Whether Twain is offering his own critical assessment of the rituals of the dervishes or a tongue-in-cheek commentary on American religion and cultural prejudice, his comments, while made abroad, also suggest that those immigrant novelists who represented their rituals in literature in the United States addressed a complex web of attitudes that contained both fascination and revulsion, and was, further, conditioned by unconscious religious, cultural, and racial factors. For this reason, it is important to map the representations of ritual by immigrant authors onto the American religious and cultural milieu of the time in order to identify the dynamics of the prevailing American attitudes toward ritual, the exigencies which gave rise to the use of ritual in these novels, and the purposes it served for the authors, the immigrant communities, and the audience at large in all their varying degrees of Americanness.

## *II. Immigrant Ritual and American Religious History*

The American religious and political milieu at the time of the great wave of immigration beginning in the 1880’s was itself turbulent, and American attitudes toward ritual practice were a complicated legacy of American history and prejudice against the religious practice of both Native Americans and Roman Catholics, as well as fears of



witchcraft, dating back to the written accounts of the first explorers and colonists. In *The General History of Virginia*, Captain John Smith records the ritual practice of the Indians of the Chesapeake Bay as the groaning and grunting of “fiends,” who with “hellish” voices and “most strange gestures” attempted to ascertain his intentions toward them. Smith’s account is one of the first American texts to link the ritual practice of the Other to the primitive, the superstitious, the childish, and the diabolical (21).

In *Religion and American Culture*, George Marsden distinguishes two important strands within American religious thought that contributed to an American bias against ritual practice: the Dissenting and Enlightenment traditions. Both of these tributaries later merged into a common current of anti-ritual bias, most often reflected in anti-Catholicism. The Puritans, as heirs of the Protestant Reformation, sought to remove from worship all religious practice that was not biblically based, requiring the elimination of the lavish ecclesiastical adornments and the formal rituals of Anglican worship. Ritual was allied with the abuses of papal power in the Puritan mind, and with Catholic corruption and the subjugation of individual religious conscience. William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation* recalls the Separatist recognition that the “base and beggarly ceremonies” of the Anglican church were unbiblical and unlawful, requiring a submission that was “contrary to the freedom of the gospel” and “ma[d]e a profane mixture of persons and things in the worship of God” (86). In *Roads to Rome*, Jenny Franchot examines the Calvinist “anti-corporeal aspirations” and the exaltation of the Puritan Word and Voice over the “flesh-bound powers of Rome” that made the ritual use of the body in Catholicism especially repugnant to the Puritan mind. This anti-Catholic bias conflated Catholic ritual with Native American ritual encountered in the new world,

which was also seen as both primitive and diabolical. Later, in the eighteenth century, these attitudes were reinforced as the Great Awakening's emphasis on the conversion experience rather than the ritual of baptism as a mark of true Christianity, and its egalitarian vision of the church as a gathering of spirit-filled individuals rather than a hierarchical structure of ritually subordinated bodies, furthered what Franchot describes as a continual movement from the material and the ceremonial to the spiritual and the verbal in American Protestantism.

A similar bias existed in the deistic rationalism of the Enlightenment tradition promoted by American patriots, which viewed the Catholic Church as the ecclesiastical despot of the Dark Ages, ruling by superstitious ritual practices that maintained the power of the clergy over the individual believer. The ritually elaborate Church of England was on the side of the English monarchy and tied political power to membership in the Anglican Church, two aspects of Anglicanism that contradicted the democratic vision of American revolutionaries and contributed to the conflation of the rituals of monarchy and the rituals of religion in the minds of patriotic Americans.<sup>1</sup> The founding fathers did, however, recognize the political power of ritual to build national solidarity and used secular ritual enactments such as burning in effigy, funeral processions for King George, and tarring and feathering ceremonies as a means of resistance to the "oppressive" rituals of Catholicism, Anglicanism, and the English monarchy, and to incite Americans toward

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson, while nominally an Anglican, was theologically more akin to the Unitarian, and was profoundly influenced by the work of Joseph Priestly, the founder of Unitarianism. Like his Deist compatriot Benjamin Franklin, Jefferson considered the truth of Christianity to consist in the moral teachings of Jesus that lay beneath the irrational distortions and "abracadabra" that the church had introduced. Jefferson, who went so far as to cut out all parts of his copy of the New Testament except the life and teachings of Jesus, rejected rituals and sacraments as the proper form of worship in favor of acts of love toward his fellow human beings (Holmes 85).

revolt, practices that prefigure the conditions of immigrant, civil, and nativist ritual practice over a century later.

During the early nineteenth century, the second Great Awakening and the rise of revivalism countered Deism's influence and increased the tendency in American Protestantism toward spontaneous and individual outpourings of the spirit rather than the collectively sanctioned and formalized practice of religious ritual. Ahlstrom notes that during this period a distinctive form of American Protestantism emerged that was "bent chiefly on revival tasks, inspired by the vision of the United States as a great new Christian republic, [and] was quick to attack Roman Catholicism and other foreign excrescences on the American religious scene." He also states that "liturgical formality, and sacramental emphases became familiar objects of attack and even derision," as ritual, which objectifies an allegiance to the practices of the past, continued to be associated with backward superstition, mental servitude, and the corruption of the flesh (*The Protestant Encounter with World Religions* 16).

The nineteenth century saw another development that was significant for American attitudes toward immigrant ritual practice: the beginnings of comparative religious studies in the United States. The first major American studies of world religions were published in the mid-nineteenth century at the same time that the nation began receiving reports on the ritual practice of "the heathen" from Protestant missionaries. Both sources of information, especially the missionary reports, were generally used to reinforce the superiority of Christianity and tended to dismiss ritual as part of the superstition of primitive societies. Charles A. Goodrich's survey of world religions, *A Pictorial Account and Descriptive View of all Religions To Which is Added a Brief View*

*of Minor Sects... Also a History of the Jews and Life of Mohommed* (1851), dismisses Chinese religion as “full of superstitions” and gives Taoism merely a page, yet the work became preeminent in the American field of world religions at the time and was avidly read by Americans curious about the beliefs and practices of other religious traditions. While there were intellectual forays into the field of comparative religion, the general American position with regard to world religions at this point was one of “intellectual isolation, [. . .] anti-intellectualism, national arrogance, and substantially unchallenged fundamentalism” (18). The American interest in world religions culminated in the nineteenth century at the World’s Parliament of Religions, a part of the Chicago Exposition of 1893. While the project was conceived as a first step on the road to achieving a discourse on religion for a globalizing society, it suffered in many ways from a competing Western project to Christianize the world (Seager 10).

A large part of these attitudes was conditioned by the rise of Protestant Nativism within the United States, which John Higham describes as “convert[ing] social and economic conflicts into religious and nationalistic ones,” and which gave rise to a concomitant anti-Catholic prejudice in response to the challenge to the vision of America as a Protestant Zion by the influx of Irish Catholic immigrants in the 1840s (82). Franchot notes that the Calvinist anti-corporeal bias often saw a miscegenation of spirit and matter in Catholic ritual that mirrored racial sensitivities in the antebellum period. Nevertheless, mainstream antebellum writers displayed an overt interest in ritual in general. James Fenimore Cooper’s depiction of Native American ritual practice in the *Leatherstocking* tales appealed to both American and European tastes for the exotic, eventually influencing the French novelist Eugene Sue’s *The Mysteries of Paris*, which, in turn,

influenced immigrant novels like the German Heinrich Börnstein's *Die Geheimnisse des St. Louis* and the Italian Bernardino Ciambelli's *I Misteri di Bleeker Street*, written in urban America. Nathaniel Hawthorne frequently used the rituals of both witchcraft and Roman Catholicism to interrogate the Puritan legacy of the individual religious conscience, and Lydia Maria Child linked Native American and Anglican ritual at the forefront of her novel *Hobomok* as a sign of the artistic, sensual, and mystical in confrontation with the strictures of Puritan society. Most importantly, in a career that continued late into the nineteenth century despite public rejection, Herman Melville used ritual repeatedly, from *Typee* to *Billy Budd*, to enact the systole and diastole of constraint and ecstasy in the human condition. The interest in ritual evident in mainstream antebellum literature may have been the residue of the Gothic period or a sign of a greater willingness to explore the exotic as part of the quest for a uniquely American literature. More significantly, it may have been due to an unconscious sense of the need for a ritual catharsis to purge and unify a country deeply stained and strained by slavery, as Melville's *Battle Pieces* makes clear. Melville's dry-eyed grief, revealed in poems like "Shiloh" and "The March into Virginia," reflects his recognition of the Civil War as what Victor Turner called the liminal moment, a moment in which a neophyte is subjected to the stripping away of all previously held notions in order to receive divine wisdom and move into a newly received status. In Melville's view, such instruction, considering America's history and the human condition in general, was necessarily tragic; yet the outcome, if America could be initiated into spiritual maturity, might be worth the price.

Sadly, Melville died without seeing his hopes fulfilled. The ritual of purgation seems to have taken place without a renovation of the national consciousness. In the post-

bellum period, the presentation of ritual moved to the margins in American literature as the Gilded Age provided more stimulating and stylish occupations for the American mind. This may have been partly the result of the rise of realism and the efforts of writers like William Dean Howells to focus literature on the real as opposed to the romantic and to the thorough amalgamation of the dissenting and patriotic traditions, which Ahlstrom, citing Sidney Mead, argues was the central development in American religious culture during the decades after the Civil War (845). Once again, ritual seems to have been dismissed as part of a more primitive time by mainstream writers like Twain, who wryly presented it as the pastime of dirty, deluded, poverty-stricken races in Europe and the Holy Land. Twain's depictions of the "primitive" rituals of foreigners conferred a smirk upon the American Janus-gaze at the religions of the Old World and immigrant religious worship at home. Hence, ritual practice became less a part of mainstream fiction and more the province of marginalized groups, as can be seen in the work of regionalists like Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*, and Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*.

### *III. The American Religion and Civil Religion at the Time of Immigration*

A few years later, during the early decades of the twentieth century, French political scientist and educator Andre Siegfried observed what had been true for three hundred years: that Protestantism was America's "only national religion and to ignore that fact is to view the country from a false angle" (*America Comes of Age* 56). Most religious historians agree with Siegfried's observation. Ahlstrom remarks that by the 1880's an Evangelical Protestant mainstream made up eighty percent of American Protestantism and fifty-five percent of the American religious population, and that a

minor revolution in church and state relations had strengthened the legal status of Protestantism in most states in the Union (843). Nevertheless, the plain, white walls of the national Protestant meeting house were being shaken by factionalism and theological trauma, and spattered by the immigrant influx itself. "Next to rapid urban expansion," writes Ahlstrom, "probably no historical development of the later nineteenth century had a heavier impact on the spiritual self-consciousness of the American people than the demographic revolution produced by immigration" (*A Religious History of the American People* 749).

Many aspects of the mainstream Protestant church during the period of immigration exacerbated the tensions experienced by immigrants in attempting to carry out their religious observances. The degree to which foreign traditions contrasted sharply with typical American religious practice intensified problems. John Higham has underscored the intimate relationship between the mainstream Protestant Church and the ideological behemoth of Nativism that continued to sound and breach from the 1840's through the early twentieth centuries. As the Protestant hegemony began to be challenged by the rise of urbanization, the labor movement, and the strange appearance and practices of incoming aliens, its members sought to buttress the walls of the meetinghouse against the theological and social implications of these changes. Consequently, the mainstream Protestant church became a bastion of middle-class morality and the status quo, adapting itself to the popular ideals of American patriotism, Manifest Destiny, and the aspirations of the common man to material prosperity. Books like Josiah Strong's *Our Country* continued the Anglo-Protestant amalgam of theology and racial supremacy and combined the rhetoric of the pulpit with a call to arms against the dangers of corruption by urban

immigrants. Yet, at the same time, in the margins of Protestantism, disinherited, native-born Pentecostals and snake handlers (who developed rituals of their own) sought rebirth in the life of the spirit and found their own ecstatic means of breaking out of the strictures of mainstream practice.

The nineteenth century also witnessed a surge in revivalism among evangelical Christians, which similarly diminished the role of ritual with an emphasis on personal choice and emotion as Americans sought spontaneous emotional release at the hearing of the Word rather than the choreographed use of the body to create and express religious truth. In Protestantism, both mainstream and marginal, liberal and conservative, the tendency was toward a radically individualistic Arminianism that was anti-liturgical in that it “vented both an American love for spontaneity and a deeper anti-Catholic animus” (847). The evangelical impulse within the Protestant church found expression in other ways that heightened the tensions in immigrant ritual practice. For example, Jews were often the major targets of the Protestant nationalist conflation of conversion and assimilation as the rise of pre-millennial dispensationalism, the belief that the Second Coming of Christ would occur only after the restoration of Israel and the conversion of 144,000 Jews, led to a feverish proselytizing within the Jewish ghetto.

Alongside this faction within Protestantism emerged that of theological Liberalism and Progressivism in response to the theological crises of the nineteenth century, a movement that sought to find some universal values to which human beings could cling in the aftermath, and to advance humankind into a millennial future based on human achievement rather than on the Second Coming of Christ. Both groups found ritual’s tendency to reinforce cultural and religious boundaries antithetical to their



platform of religious unity and progress, and viewed the practice of ritual by marginalized groups, whether immigrant or Native American, as partially responsible for their marginalization and as an impediment to the realization of a global religious discourse of reason and inclusion (Marty 107-8). Ahlstrom remarks that liberal Christians “tended to slight traditional dogma and the sacraments. Baptism came to be considered as an initiatory formality [. . .] while the Lord’s Supper was usually given memorial significance and its importance to public worship was minimized” (779).

A further complication was added as Protestant reformist fervor and Nativism blended with American civil religion to create new forms of civil ritual practice as well.<sup>2</sup> In *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm has traced the general movement in the nineteenth century among emerging nations in Europe toward the creation of secular rituals to reinforce national solidarity. Although a similar tactic had already been used during the early years of the American Republic, a new crop of civil religious rituals emerged during the period of immigration as Americans, feeling the need for unification after the Civil War, became anxious in the face of the multicultural and ideological invasion of American territory by foreign hordes.

Because, as theorist David Kertzer claims, rituals objectify relationships between individuals and organizations, for immigrants to engage in their religious rituals in such

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<sup>2</sup>In his landmark essay “Civil Religion in America” (1967), Robert Bellah discusses the significance of American civil religion described as “an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality,” which makes use of the Old and New Testament archetypes of Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, and sacrificial Death and Rebirth. Bellah notes that American civil religion was never conceived as a substitute for Christianity although it borrowed many of its concepts. Rather, it “was able to build up without any bitter struggle with the church powerful symbols of national solidarity and to mobilize deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals” (*Daedalus*, Winter, 1967: 1-21).

an environment meant that they entered into activity that placed them in tension with the ritual enactments of American civil religion and the anti-ritualistic bias of both Evangelical and Liberal Protestantism. Performed within the constellation of religious and quasi-religious loyalties competing in American society at the time, immigrant rituals became political acts, even acts of cultural resistance akin to the Ghost Dance rituals practiced by the Sioux, which led directly to the massacre at Wounded Knee during the same period. Immigrant novelists were quick to pick up on the political significance of ritual practice and responded in varying degrees of cultural resistance, depending on their own attitudes toward assimilation. Indeed, all of the immigrant novels to be examined in this study use the special features of ritual to interrogate the entanglement of the ethnic, the religious, and the political in America, an entanglement which often made it impossible to be a good American and a faithful practitioner of one's religious faith at the same time.

#### *IV. Ritual Theory and Immigrant Religious Practice*

One of the primary tasks in a study devoted to the use of ritual by immigrant writers is that of establishing a working definition of ritual, a task that has preoccupied theorists since the beginning of its study. The scientific study of ritual, which began in the late nineteenth century, has consistently connected it to the special use of the body and the word, to delineating boundaries, especially social boundaries, and to asserting contrasts, especially the contrast between the sacred and the profane. This dissertation will make use of several theories of ritual to establish the special properties that make it such a powerful means of illuminating the immigrant experience. Opinions have varied widely on what exactly ritual is, what it does, and what distinguishes ritual from other

types of human behavior. A few examples might demonstrate the lack of consensus among scholars of ritual: Emile Durkheim suggested that “rites are the means by which the social group reaffirms itself periodically” (387). Victor Turner defined ritual as “formal behavior prescribed for occasions not given over to technological routine that have reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers” (*Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* 243). David Kertzer defines ritual as “action wrapped in a web of symbolism” (9). Sally Moore and Barbara Meyerhoff define ritual as “an act or actions intentionally conducted by a group of people employing one or more symbols in a repetitive, formal, precise, highly stylized fashion” (199). Robert Bocoock’s definition stresses the rhetorical aspects of ritual: “Ritual is the symbolic use of bodily movement and gesture in a social situation to express and articulate meaning” (37), while David Parkin’s emphasizes its spatial aspects: “Ritual is formulaic spatiality carried out by groups of people who are conscious of its imperative or compulsory nature and who may or may not further inform this spatiality with spoken words” (18). Finally, Jonathan Smith simply states, “Ritual is, above all, an assertion of differences” (109).

The controversy over establishing the salient characteristics of ritual continued unabated for decades until theorist Jack Goody, in “Against Ritual,” finally suggested that it was impossible to define it as a separate form of human behavior and that the category of “ritual” should be done away with entirely. Contemporary ritologists like Catherine Bell disagree because they feel that the concept of ritual is too deeply embedded in human consciousness for us to cease trying to explain it. Bell, who identifies the characteristics of “fixity,” “repetition” and “formality” as fundamental to any understanding of ritual, prefers to use the term “ritualization” to denote a strategic

practice, rooted in the body, that specifically differentiates itself through a symbolically constituted spatial and temporal environment as more important or powerful than other ways of acting.

Although I will examine immigrant ritual within the context of the rituals practiced by civic, nativist, and secret societies of the time, my primary focus will be on the *religious* ritual of immigrants for two reasons: 1) To open up the parameters of this study to *any* type of behavior that might be classified as ritualized would require a breadth that is beyond the compass of a dissertation; 2) *Religious* ritual was so politically charged during this time period, and was such a contact zone between factions within the immigrant and native-born community, that to focus on ritual behavior apart from its theological dimensions would be to neglect one of the richest aspects of the discussion. What Durkheim wrote of primitive religious ritual is true of the immigrant practice of ritual as well: “The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is *stronger*. He feels within him more force, either to endure the trials of existence or to conquer them” (416).

Therefore, my definition of religious ritual, which draws upon the work of several ritual theorists, is as follows: *Ritual is intentionally symbolic human behavior that periodically frames a point in time and space through formalized physical movement, may include a special use of language, makes reference to a sacred realm which it seeks to distinguish from the profane, and serves to negotiate relationships between an individual or group and an Other or others.* I feel that this definition is supported by the

work of scholars in the field of ritual studies and is especially useful for exploring the political and cultural significance of the use of ritual practice by immigrant writers.

The theorists whom I find most important for this study include most of those already mentioned. Their discussions of the special properties of ritual will enhance my ability to delineate the ways in which ritual acts upon the individual participant and the social bodies it addresses. I will draw on some theorists more than others, most prominently Emile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, Theodore Jennings, Catherine Bell, David Kertzer, Gerd Baumann, Mircea Eliade, and Victor Turner. A brief discussion of their theories follows.

In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim, the father of ritual studies, located the significance of ritual in its power to reinforce the bonds of a social community by bestowing a feeling of power and security which the social body experiences as a moral force emanating from outside the community itself but which is, in fact, the collective force of the group. Durkheim recognized the power of ritual to forestall feelings of vulnerability and isolation, and to organize and regulate the moral life of human beings. I will draw from Durkheim in discussions relating ritual practice to the moral life of immigrants and immigrant communities, and its importance as a medium for reinforcing ethnic identity.

Clifford Geertz's discussion of ritual's ability to create and house its participants in an ideal world is especially useful for my discussions involving the immigrant experience of place, time, memory, the aesthetic, and the moral order. Geertz also discusses the importance of understanding the differing roles that ritual establishes between insiders and outsiders and emphasizes that ritual performances are "not only the

point at which the dispositional and conceptual aspects of religious life converge *for the believer*, but also the point at which the interaction between them can be most readily examined *by the detached observer*” (113). I plan to use these aspects of his theory in my discussion of immigrant writers and the political uses of ritual, particularly when the writer seems to implicate the reader as a non-ethnic observer of the ritual act.

In “On Ritual Knowledge,” Theodore Jennings provides several key concepts that will be critical to this study. Jennings argues that ritual is a special form of embodied knowing that serves important noetic functions for the participant by providing an exploratory means of discovering “the fitting action” in the world as encountered by the Sacred (120). Because it relates to human actions, ritual for Jennings is intimately connected with ethics, and, because it searches for the *fitting* action, it is also indirectly tied to the aesthetic. Jennings uses Turner’s idea of the liminal state as the primary means of the transfer of wisdom, not by intellectual or speculative means but by the practice of ritual itself. According to Jennings, ritual is knowledge through action, a specialized form of knowing by which the body “minds itself” through paradigmatic activities that govern not only the ritual action but all other forms of the ritual action in the outside world. Jennings claims that the ultimate object of ritual action is ontological or cosmogonic practice, and that “to participate in a ritual is to know how the world acts, how it ‘comes to be’” (121). Jennings’s theories will be useful in a variety of contexts, particularly for explorations of the body and the aesthetic, and for the immigrant use of ritual as an ethical compass, a means of exploring the nature of the fitting action in a radically different world.

Catherine Bell borrows from Jennings and Pierre Bourdieu in her theory of ritual, which, for purposes of this study, includes two very important aspects: the embodied logic of ritual and its power to create what Bell calls “redemptive hegemony.” Bell and Bourdieu join Jennings and many other scholars who locate ritual primarily in the body, with language as a secondary component. They recognize that the body mediates “via a dialectic of objectification and embodiment” that makes it the center of coordination for social and cosmological experience, and that ritual practice passes on schemes of perception through subconscious means often without ever bringing those schemes to the level of conscious awareness or social discourse.

Bell argues that the purpose of ritual is to produce a ritualized body—that is, a body with a “sense of ritual” which it carries into the world at large. In a manner similar to Jennings, Bell claims that ritual creates a “structured and structuring environment” which leads to the embodying of those structures outside the sphere of ritual practice. By redefining the problems of existence in terms of the ritual itself through formalized and orchestrated movements in time and space, ritual creates what Bell calls “redemptive hegemony” (84), which provides participants with a sense of empowerment through having discharged the true obligations of existence and, in turn, enables them to reenter the outside world with a sense of “ritual mastery.” Bell’s concepts of the centrality of the body and redemptive hegemony will be essential to my exploration of the importance of ritual in dignifying the immigrant body and the political use of ritual by immigrant writers to interrogate and critique the immigrant’s confrontation with competing redemptive hegemonies within the American culture of the time.

In addition, the work of David Kertzer and Gerd Baumann, who recognize the political power of ritual and its relationship to cultural resistance in pluralistic societies, will figure strongly in my discussion. Kertzer's *Rituals, Politics, and Power* examines the role of ritual in the negotiation of power relationships within societies and the degree to which ritual can undermine the solidarity of a society as a whole by bolstering the solidarity of one of its internal political antagonists, an effect that will be especially pertinent to a discussion of ritual and ethnic factions in American society.

Baumann, in turn, goes beyond Durkheim's understanding of ritual as performed by cohesive societies in order to endorse basic values for themselves alone. Instead, Baumann claims that in plural societies rituals "[are] complicated by the presence of 'Others,' be it as 'visible' participants or as 'invisible categorical referents'" and that "ritual performances, symbols and meanings may be directed at these as much as, if not sometimes more than, at the ritual core 'community' itself" (99). Baumann's notion of the implicit Other addressed by ritual practice will also be important with regard to the immigrant writer's implication of the reader, who, as is clear from the strategies and language the writer uses, is most often understood as native-born as well as ethnic. Both of these theorists will be invaluable in supporting my assertion that immigrant ritual was a political act within the highly charged arena of American religious practice.

The work of Mircea Eliade will assist me in relating the immigrant's use of ritual to the task of constructing place out of American space. In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade points to the importance of ritual and hierophany in establishing a still point in the turning world of homogeneous space and its importance for achieving a sense of



orientation in the cosmos. I will thus use the work of Eliade in my exploration of the immigrant use of ritual in the context of the polarities of space and place in America.

Finally, Victor Turner, who expanded on the theories of his predecessor, Arnold Van Gennep, constructs ritual by means of a tripartite scheme which he felt was true for all ritual practice: separation, liminality, and re-incorporation. That is, in all rites of passage, the ritual participant is first separated from the structures of society and enters a liminal state in which he or she is stripped of all previous means of identity in preparation for the new state, which, once achieved, will include reintegration into the group once again. For Turner, the liminal state performs an important compensatory role for society by providing a context in which the preordained hierarchies of daily life are overturned and true *communitas* can be achieved—that is, an ordering of human relationships along truly personal and egalitarian lines that is the opposite of the structuring and institutionalizing tendencies in society. Turner's interest in the liminal state will be critical to my conclusion in which I will seek to connect immigrant ritual practice to broader issues of American religion and identity.

#### *V. Overview*

This dissertation will consist of five chapters, thematically arranged so as to allow an exploration of a variety of issues in connection with a broad heading. The arrangement will move from most concrete to most abstract—from the body of the immigrant to the body politic. Due to the multiple significances of ritual practice, the flow of the discourse may seem somewhat elliptical— theories and novels that I examine in one chapter will resurface in another as different areas of the discussion intersect.

Chapter One will concern the use of ritual by immigrant writers to dignify and empower the immigrant body at a time in which it was the target of racial prejudice and scrutiny. In general, the greater the degree of its dissimilarity to the Anglo-Saxon body, the more contempt the immigrant body received. For example, because Italian bodies were linked with the Negro body, more Italians were lynched than any other immigrant group. While the male Italian body was brutalized by labor conditions and attacks from outside the ethnic group, the *female* Italian body was also subject to oppression and attack from *within* the ethnic group, and often served as the sacrificial object for the expiation of the tensions and failures of the Italian immigrant community. Italian immigrant writers often used ritual in connection with the female body to confront a variety of issues regarding ethnic and spiritual purity. Similarly, as Sander Gilman has explained, the Jewish body was continually studied, beginning in the eighteenth century, in order to demonstrate the unfitness of the Jew for inclusion in the social body. The Jewish novels, in turn, show a preoccupation with the body and, in some cases, explicitly identify the Jewish body with the body of Christ. In this chapter, therefore, I will focus on Jewish and Italian immigrant novels, making use of the theories of Jennings and Bell, which stress the empowerment of the body through ritual, to argue that immigrant writers used ritual to dignify the immigrant body and to critique its degradation both within the community and in American society.

Chapter Two will concern the importance of ritual to the immigrant project of constructing immigrant place within the American rural and urban landscape, themselves metaphors of American cultural space. Since the immigrant's primary experience was one of *dis*-location, one of the primary concerns of the religious rituals in immigrant

novels is that of establishing a place within American space in which the sacred and the ethnic could be protected. In urban America, the ghetto was ostensibly a place in which the immigrant could experience life according to his or her own customs and beliefs, but it was also circumscribed by American space, which often seemed chaotic, incomprehensible, exclusionary, and alien to the immigrant's needs and concerns. In addition to their awareness of American control of space, immigrant communities often patrolled and circumscribed their own spaces within the ghetto. For example, in *Jews Without Money*, Michael Gold recalls the thrill and anguish of his forays into the adjacent Italian neighborhood only to be insulted and chased away, while Italian writers like Louis Forgione and Garibaldi LaPolla use the religious processions of the Italian *festa* to celebrate ethnic space within the competing cultures surrounding Little Italy. In this chapter, I will employ the theories of Yi Fu Tuan, Jonathan Smith, and Mircea Eliade, along with the work of William Boelhower on ethnicity and place, to discuss novels written by Louis Forgione, O.E. Rølvaag, and Elias Tobenkin and to argue that immigrant writers used ritual as part of the project of achieving orientation and a sacred place of habitation within the disorienting and often hostile American landscape and culture.

In Chapter Three the discussion will turn to the relationship between immigrant ritual and language. The struggle with language was a key component of the immigrant struggle in America. Because the immigrants selected for this study come from non-English-speaking groups, they were all beset by the problem of language. Mastery of English was the key to survival, or at least to assimilation, and this often meant a de-emphasis if not a total rejection of the language of one's native land in favor of English.

Thus, ritual, with its use of bodily movement to express religious truth, was significant with regard to language because it provided a silent means for immigrant expression that transcended language and the politics of language both inside and outside the ethnic community.

Furthermore, the special use of ethnic and specialized languages in immigrant novels reflects the political struggle between ethnic language and the dominant language of the culture. Ritual observance often includes the specialized use of language, which raises the additional issue of *which* language should be used for religious devotion. This issue was especially problematic within the Jewish community, where a pecking order of languages was established with English and Hebrew in competition for top rank, while the former folk-language of Yiddish struggled to move up from the bottom with the assistance of writers like Abraham Cahan, who sought to raise it to the status of a literary language.

The debate over language within the Jewish community reflects a common theme within immigrant social bodies regarding the power and politics of religious language in the United States as it relates to the Protestant emphasis on the Word and ethnic conceptions of Holy Language, whether it be the Hebrew or Latin of ancient religious tradition or the language of the ethnic community itself, which took on overtones of holiness as it became allied with the simultaneous preservation of religion and ethnic identity. In this chapter, I will use the novels of Lawrence Sterner, Rølvaag, and Cahan to argue that immigrant writers used conflicts over the ritual use of the Word to explore the relationship between language, assimilation, and the loss of sacred community in America.

Chapter Four will examine the connection between ritual and the aesthetic.

Pierre Bourdieu has explained that ritual makes use of all of the senses— not only the five senses but also the sense of the moral and the sense of the beautiful. Indeed, ritual in general, through its use of formalized movements to order space and time and its special use of the Word, provided the immigrant with an experience of beauty that in many cases was unavailable elsewhere. Irving Howe describes the ghetto as a place of squalid, poorly lit “dumbbell” tenements, poor sanitation, without a shred of natural greenery to mitigate the ugliness of the surroundings. Anzia Yeziarska’s protagonists often testify to the accuracy of Howe’s description and the immigrant’s need for aesthetic gratification when they express their revulsion at the ugliness of their surroundings and their longing for beauty

Since immigrants had little means and little opportunity to beautify their surroundings, ritual practices like Jewish Sabbath observances, Passover meals, communion services, and processions with elaborately decorated saints and Madonnas assumed critical importance as they enabled immigrants to inhabit a place in which the holy and the beautiful were available at once. Younghill Kang’s memories of the highly stylized rituals of ancestor worship in *The Grass Roof* and *East Goes West* reveal the degree to which ritual enhanced for him the aesthetic sensibilities of the Confucian sage. Kang uses these memories to heighten our experience of the dislocation of his protagonist Chungpa Han, whose aestheticism finds no place in the pragmatic framework of American material culture.

In many of the immigrant novels, the question of aesthetics in ritual becomes an arena for critiquing aesthetics and the politics of beauty in America in general. In many

of the Jewish novels, for example, orthodox protagonists are often placed in bewildering, even traumatic, confrontations with western understandings of beauty, both inside and outside of Judaism, raising, in turn, the issue of *whose* definition of beauty should dominate ritual practice. Ethnic conceptions of beauty were complicated by the unease and condescension with which native-born Americans regarded their conceptions of the beautiful. At the same time that Yezierska strove to represent the Jew as devoted to the beautiful, novels like Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, according to Walter Benn Michaels, presented Jewish aesthetic failure as a sign of racial failure. I will discuss Yezierska's *Bread Givers* in this chapter, along with Steiner's *The Mediator*, and Kang's novels *The Grass Roof* and *East Goes West*, as I argue that immigrant writers used the experience of ritual to comment on the absence of beauty in immigrant life and to question the politics of the aesthetic in American life.

The final chapter will explore the use of ritual by immigrant writers to question and critique the competing redemptive hegemonies within American culture during the period. As was discussed above, America presented a bewildering array of choices and competing plans for salvation to the immigrant. Immigrant writers often used ritual as a tool for circumscribing various permutations of insiders and outsiders, as characters struggle with competing redemptive hegemonies. The immigrant was faced with other religions, other forms of his *own* religion, American civil religion and Americanization efforts, as well as the American vision of redemption through material success, all of which further complicated his efforts to satisfy his spiritual needs and to find community in an often lonely place. Because the ethnic and religious selves were so intertwined in American culture at the time, the two could not easily be separated, forcing immigrants

into difficult choices between redemptive hegemonies or into ambivalent and often unsatisfying attempts to combine or live between conflicting visions of redemption. David Kertzer has explained that “rituals are typically found when individuals confront transition points in their lives and that strong emotions associated with ritual often reflect the inner conflicts, uncertainties and fears that afflict people in such circumstances” (100). Add to these tensions the complications brought on by the experience of immigration, and the possibility of religious or moral crisis at the ritual moment is multiplied exponentially. This chapter will use novels by Ciambelli, Steiner, and Rölvaag to examine the ways in which the ritual moment often became the deciding moment in which immigrants and immigrant writers were forced to navigate within a complex constellation of power relationships in America, all of which claimed to be paths to salvation.

The conclusion will attempt to tie the major themes discussed in the main chapters to larger religious and cultural issues, such as the ambivalent relationship in America between the spiritual and the material, the sacred and the profane, the religious and the ethnic. In addition, I will discuss the ways the concerns addressed in these novels speak to current domestic and international issues relating to religion and ethnicity.

I selected the particular ethnic groups included in this study for several reasons. First, I sought to include groups that faced the most challenges in the American landscape, whether physical, as in the case of the Norwegians, or cultural as in the case of Italians, Jews and Asians, because of my desire to explore the ability of ritual to empower and preserve individuals and groups in the face of adversity. I also wished to include non-English speaking immigrants in order to explore the ways ritual functioned as an

alternative language and as a crucible in which the issue of the politics of language was intensified. Finally, I attempted to assemble the most disparate group of ethnicities I could find. To include only Northern European immigrants would have been to miss an opportunity to discover the *cantus firmus* in the polyphony of immigrant religion, the commonalities shared by widely differing ethnic groups in the experience and practice of ritual.

This study is intended to apply the broad view suggested by Dolan in order to establish some preliminary theoretical foundations for the study of immigrant literature as it relates to immigrant religion, American religion, and the complex American relationship to ritual itself. It is by necessity preliminary. To attempt such an overview, one runs the risk of overgeneralizing and universalizing, of setting up the Protestant hegemony as a monolithic Goliath, which the embattled immigrant fought with his ritual slingshot. Although there was a dominant Anglo-Protestant hegemony in America at the time of the great wave of immigration that was indeed allied with anti-Catholic and anti-ritual bias, Nativism, and a sense of racial and cultural superiority, Protestantism had its own spectrum of religious observance, from the elaborate rituals of High Anglicanism to the simple silence of a Quaker meetinghouse. This discussion is not intended as the final word on Protestantism but as a general assessment of the particular kind of Protestantism that had become so pervasive at the time and which is presented by immigrant writers in the novels themselves.

Since the concept of ritual is also subject to much debate, as discussed above, one runs the further risk of setting up boundaries that are either too rigid or too permeable when seeking to define ritual observance in America. Even when the discussion is limited



to religious ritual, there is room for debate. An additional challenge is posed by the insider/outsider problem in the study of ritual raised by Geertz: Who is best able to interpret the content or function of ritual for a particular group, the objective outsider or the subjective insider? Can either be considered wholly objective or subjective? This study is predicated upon the idea that immigrant writers were somehow both insiders and outsiders to their communities, and that they intentionally sought to make available to the American public some insight into the significance of ritual for their communities and for the American community, which by necessity consists of multiple perspectives on any ritual practice, indicating their belief that the definitive word on immigrant ritual practice is somehow itself plural.

These challenges are significant, yet it seems worth the risks involved to consider immigrant ritual from a broad perspective because exploration of the immigrant religious dilemma has direct bearing on the larger issue of how Americans perceive the religious practice of other cultures in an increasingly interethnic world. If, as Oscar Handlin has claimed, immigrant history *is* American history, then the immigrant *religious* experience must be moved to the center of American religious history as well. The degree to which we can see the religious experience of the alien as *the* American religious experience may well be the degree to which we can absolve the religious alien of the projections of our own national unconscious.

## Chapter One: Ritual Somatics: Purity, Power, and the Immigrant Body

Franz Boas began his North American anthropological studies by lifting skulls from Native American graves and comparing their measurements to those of living Native American prisoners in a Victoria jail (Stocking 189). In the presentation of the results of his studies to the International Congress of Anthropology in 1894, Boas, who unlike most scientists of his time, did not conceive of racial types as static but as continually developing products of heredity and environment, made an interesting remark, especially when we consider the next big project he would undertake:

There is no necessary correlation between the social unit which we call a tribe and the physical unit which constitutes the characteristics of the individuals of a certain region. The physical type is the result of the complex descent of a people and of the effect of the surroundings upon its physical development. It has nothing to do with the political and social organizations which we call tribes or nations.

*(Memoirs of the International Congress of Anthropology 193)*

A few years later, Boas would be measuring the heads of Jewish immigrant boys in New York public schools for the American Immigration Commission because native-born Anglo-Americans believed that the physical type had *everything* to do with the social organization of the American nation. Boas' statement attempts to distinguish between the physical body and the social body; but, as many immigrant writers recognized, the immigrant body was a problem precisely because of the complex and often subtle dialectic between the physical body and the social body, through which, as Mary Douglas has made clear, "there is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other" (93).

For Anglo-Americans of Boas' time, the immigrant body was a sign that evoked their historically complicated and tragic relationships to the bodies of both African Americans and Native Americans, and raised the conundrum of whether to maintain ethnic difference at the risk of social instability or to allow miscegenation at the risk of losing Anglo-American purity. For the immigrant, the body was the only home he or she possessed upon entering a Promised Land that was not, apparently, promised to everyone, a habitation battered by the pains of labor, the diseases of overcrowding, and the awareness that its architecture did not suit the American city upon a hill.

As the immigrant novels to be discussed in this chapter make clear, the *religious* body of the immigrant was also problematic for the American social body because its fixed and symbolic use in the religious practice of immigrants went against the grain of the dominant American social and religious ethos of the time. Since, as Timothy Smith suggests, the immigration experience was a "theologizing experience," the sense of covenant between immigrants and their gods often made religious expression crucial to the survival of the immigrant community (1175). Yet, the immigrant acted out his religion on an American religious stage the backdrop of which was a stained-glass mosaic of Protestant bias against the body and toward the spirit, a historical legacy of anti-Catholic prejudice which linked ritual practice to Roman Catholic entanglement with the flesh, fascination and revulsion at the ritual practices of the "heathen" as depicted in missionary reports and travel narratives, and fears of Native American ritual as both bewildering and, as in the case of the Ghost Dancers who were massacred at Wounded Knee during this period, politically dangerous. Political assimilationists of the period sought to incorporate the immigrant body into the American social body even as they

worried about what effects it would have on the bodies of Americans, while *religious* assimilationists established missions in immigrant neighborhoods to convert immigrants to American religious practice, proselytizing among Jews, for instance, in the hopes of ushering in the Millennium through their conversion.

Despite such pressures, however, many immigrant novelists deliberately called attention to the difference of the immigrant body in religious practice, as will be evident in the following discussion of the work of Italian novelists Bernardino Ciambelli and Garibaldi LaPolla, and Jewish novelists Ezra Brudno, Edward Steiner, and Abraham Cahan. These novelists consistently depict immigrants doing strange things with their bodies in ritual: They clothe them in bizarre garments, move them in strange ways, make secret signs with them, and prostrate them before iconic images of other bodies. Perhaps because they came from cultures that were highly ritualized, these writers instinctively recognized the body's symbolic power in ritual to question and critique the dynamics within the immigrant social body and between the ethnic community and the larger social and religious corpus of America, and they capitalize on this in their fiction through *ritual somatics*. In ritual somatics, immigrant writers raised the physical bodies of immigrants to the status of icons of the immigrant experience. Just as John Winthrop constructed the immigrant social body as the body of Christ during the earliest wave of European immigration to America, immigrant novelists often turned to the ritual use of iconic bodies, such as the Christ and the Virgin Mary, to represent the immigrant experience and to draw upon the theological use of somatics by the first American immigrants in order to claim a place in the immigrant theology of America.

Much of the mainstream religious practice of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century America was conditioned by liberal Christianity and millennial Christianity, both of which downplayed any fixed or institutionalized use of the body in religious devotion. Liberal Christians as well as Jews based their religious practice on a rationalistic belief that sought to unify mankind in an orderly and reasonable progression toward a universal faith that could provide an antidote to increasing materialism (Marty, 17). For this group, ritual practice was at best looked upon with condescension and at worst seen as divisive and irrational, based as it was on a symbolic use of the body, which inevitably called attention to the boundaries between religious groups.

For different reasons, Evangelical Christians also rejected traditional ritual, as they were imbued with millennial hopes of the restoration of God's kingdom on earth and viewed the ritual use of the body as an obstruction to the spontaneous outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which transcends institutional devices (Douglas 17). Mary Douglas describes the millennialist as follows:

[The millennialist] does not seek to cherish any particular social forms. He would sweep them all away. The millennialist goes in for frenzies; he welcomes the letting-go experience, and incorporates it into his procedure for bringing in the millennium. He seeks bodily ecstasy, which, by expressing for him the explosive advent of the new age, reaffirms the value of the doctrine. Philosophically his bias is towards distinguishing spirit from flesh, mind from matter [. . .] for him, the flesh [. . .] represent[s] the corruption of power and organization. (17)

This division of mind from matter was alien to most immigrants whose ritual practice enacted a fundamental belief in the body's ability to create religious truth along with the Spirit.

At the same time that they entered a religious milieu that denied the religious use of the body within religious tradition, immigrants faced another challenge in new attitudes toward the body that replaced the older Victorian mores, based on an understanding of the body as the servant of romantic love, with a focus on bodily attractiveness and sexual thrills designed to sell products. Kevin White maintains that the dawn of sexual liberalism at the turn of the century and the commodification of love destroyed the older transcendent Victorian values associated with the physical expression of love and created an emotional distancing between men and women as their relationships became a game of sexual conquest. White writes, "when love became sexualized in the early twentieth century, higher, deeper love was subsumed and buried in a compulsive search for sexual gratification" (335). For immigrants coming from cultures in which the body was at the service of the survival of the values of the community, this modern separation of the body from the emotional, the moral, and the transcendent, along with the codification of standards of physical beauty on an unprecedented scale, could be both disorienting and frightening.

Douglas has analyzed the differences in societal attitudes toward ritual as based on differences in systems of cultural control. According to Douglas, homogeneous societies with strong communal bonds who value external forms as a means of maintaining stability within the social group tend to engage in ritual, while heterogeneous societies who favor relaxed communal bonds and emphasize inner feelings and ethics

tend to reject ritual as a means of social control (32). This is surely the phenomenon experienced by immigrants coming from the tightly knit and highly formalized cultures of southern and eastern Europe to the diffuse and pluralistic society of America, a country with a religious history which emphasized inner experience and individual conscience rather than external forms as the true measure of religious integrity.

Most immigrants came from ritualized cultures where their bodies were essential parts of the seasonal, daily, even hourly expression of religious truth. In their rituals, immigrants knew what to do with their bodies: the proper place, the proper stance, the proper motion. With their bodies, they could perform a ballet of the soul, inscribe transcendent meaning into the space about them, and connect with loved ones across the sea by a common gesture. In ritual, they knew, as they knew nowhere else in American society, what theologian Theodore Jennings calls “the fitting action.”<sup>3</sup> Although their bodies were subject to the crowding and disease of tenement life and the hardships of labor, to the uncomprehending and sometimes revolted gaze of native-born Americans, and to the bewildering new sexual rules of modern American life, in their rituals immigrants could use their bodies for the highest purposes they knew. Religious ritual thus provided a means like no other for dignifying the immigrant body in an atmosphere in which it was continually degraded. Paradoxically, in the conformity of ritual practice many immigrant bodies experienced a freedom they found nowhere else in American life.

The developments in ritual theory over the last thirty years confirm the foregoing claims. The work of Michel Foucault regarding the construction of the modern subject

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<sup>3</sup> Theodore Jennings, “On Ritual Knowledge,” *The Journal of Religion*, 62.2 (1982): 120. Jennings defines the fitting action as “world in act,” or “ontological praxis”: an action which corresponds to the world of significant action, seeks both to mirror and transform the world, and serves as a paradigm for significant action outside the ritual itself. 119-120

through technologies of power exercised over bodies, along with anthropological and feminist studies of the body, have led many theorists to recognize the importance of the body in ritual practice and to regard ritual as both a disciplinary framework in which the body is used to create a ritualized subject and as a form of embodied knowing. Much current ritual theory focuses on the importance of the ritual use of the body as the mediator and constructor of religious truth and characterizes the knowledge gained from ritual practice, because it is expressed in physical activity, as intrinsically different from ordinary cognition (Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* 94). Jennings' description of the embodied knowing gained through ritual practice is representative of the attitudes of many modern ritologists:

Ritual knowledge is gained through a bodily action which alters the world or the place of the ritual participant in the world [. . .] It is primarily corporeal rather than cerebral, primarily active rather than contemplative, primarily transformative rather than speculative. [. . .] It is not so much that the mind 'embodies' itself in ritual action, but rather that the body "minds" itself or attends through itself in ritual action. (Jennings 115)

In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Pierre Bourdieu discusses the body's ability to create a "practical mastery" in ritual practice through a logic embodied in physical movement and lodged in a mythical language of the body, which is beyond the grasp of conscious articulation and is always richer than the verbal translations we attempt to impose upon it.<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu maintains that, in ritual, the body is the locus for the coordination of all levels of bodily, social, and cosmological experience through

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (London: Cambridge UP, 1977). Bourdieu provides a detailed account of his theories in Chapter Three.



unspoken “schemes” that pass from practice to practice without ever becoming explicit in personal consciousness or social discourse, and thus serves as a form of logical shorthand for those “who cannot afford the luxury of logical speculation, mystical effusions, or metaphysical anxiety” (115). While in no way a substitute for a conscious commitment to a set of beliefs, this activity would be essential to many immigrants who were faced with a theologizing experience but without the time or opportunity to analyze or interpret that experience.

Ritologist Catherine Bell also insists on the body as the locus of a dynamic and largely unconscious exchange between a mythico-ritual space which the body first constructs by means of physical movements, then absorbs and appropriates, taking it out into the world at large—a process which creates a “ritualized person” who can “generate in turn strategic schemes that can [ . . . ] dominate other socio-cultural situations” (Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* 99). In ritual devotion, the body becomes the central axis of the construction and appropriation of the sacred, and for the transformation of the world. Thus, the body, as the vessel by which this dialectic was carried on, achieved a status and power unknown in the daily experience of many immigrant groups, since it provided a sacred role for the body in contradistinction to its place in ordinary life. For many groups, then, the special status given to the body by ritual fulfilled a spiritual need which was often intensified, as was the case with Southern Italians and Eastern European Jews, by political oppression at home and marginality in America.

At the same time, the medium of ritual engaged the immigrant body in a choreography of social controls that worked toward the maintenance of stability within the ethnic community. In her analysis of ritual behavior, Douglas emphasizes Marcel

Mauss' claim that the human body can never be considered apart from its place in the social dimension and that the concern to preserve social boundaries is often projected onto the preservation of bodily boundaries (98-99). As Douglas notes, "The physical body can have universal meaning only as a system which responds to the social system, expressing it as a system" (112). Immigrant writers seem to have recognized, either consciously or unconsciously, the deep relationship between the physical body and the social body in the utterance of ritual. Since ritual not only conveys information to the social body through the symbolic actions of physical bodies, it also expresses the social body to itself and to others. Thus, it was a powerful tool for the interrogation of assumptions about the immigrant body both inside the ethnic community and in mainstream America.

Boas' study for the American Immigration Commission focused especially on the bodies of Eastern European Jews and Southern Italians.<sup>5</sup> These two ethnic groups bore the brunt of nativist and eugenicist fears because their bodies did not conform to traditional American taxonomies of race and raised fears of miscegenation, which attitudes furthered the tendency to construct the bodies of these immigrant groups as impure.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, the religious practice of Italians and Jews, which was often

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<sup>5</sup> Franz Boas, letter to Professor J.W Jenks, 3 September 1908, *The Shaping of American Anthropology 1883-1911: A Franz Boas Reader*, ed. George W. Stocking, Jr. (New York: Basic, 1974): 206. Boas specifically suggests that Southern Europeans and East European Jews, along with the "Centre Europeans," have physical characters quite different from the type of the North Western European.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to J. W. Jenks, 31 December 1909, *The Shaping of American Anthropology*, 213. Boas recognized that the problem of environment and race involving immigrants was more deeply related to the question of "the mixture between Negro and white" in America. Boas addressed nativist fears as they took shape in the identification of the southern Italian with the Negro when he anticipated that "With the large immigration from southern Europe, the time is not distant when the problem of racial intermixture between these two types will become acute."

overtly physical, was also the most problematic, not only for Protestant Americans, but also for Irish Catholics and Reformed Jews, who sought acceptance within mainstream American culture.

The southern Italian body, in particular, was linked to the African American body, not only because of its “swarthinness,” but also because Italian immigrants in the southern United States readily associated with African-Americans on a regular basis.<sup>7</sup> More Italians were lynched than any other ethnic group, the most notorious example being an incident in 1891 in which eleven Italians were taken from a jail in New Orleans, after being acquitted of the murder of a police superintendent, and hanged by a crowd of vigilantes amid cries of “Hang the Dagoes!” in what has been called the largest mass lynching in American history (Cosco 2). John Higham has noted that “the Italians were often thought to be the most degraded of the European newcomers. They were swarthy, more than half of them were illiterate, and almost all were victims of a standard of living lower than that of any of the other prominent nationalities entering the United States” (66). While Boas’ study attempted to argue for the modifying effects of environment on race characteristics, the flagrantly racist yet influential *Dictionary of Races or Peoples* (1911) compiled by William Dillingham for the Immigration Commission took a different approach. The *Dictionary*, according to Higham, created an “invidious contrast between the northwestern and southeastern Europeans in the United States,” and distinguished between the light-skinned “Aryan” Italians of the North and the dark-skinned “Hamitic” Italians of the South, using the bodies of Italians to differentiate

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<sup>7</sup> This association extended into church policy. Rudolph Vecoli reports that Italians were often seated with Negroes at the back of the church, denounced as “Dagos” from the pulpit, and told they were unwanted. “Prelates and Peasants: Italian Immigrants and the Catholic Church.” *Journal of Social History* 2.3 (1969): 230.

further between their mental characteristics. The *Dictionary* described the northern Italian as “cool, deliberate, patient,” and readily assimilable, and the darker southerner as “excitable, impulsive,” with “little adaptability to highly organized society” and a tendency toward violent crime (qtd. in Cosco 176). Although they differed in their assessments of the prospects of immigrant assimilation, both Boas and Dillingham used the immigrant body as topography of the immigrant mind. The darker the physiognomy, the more primitive the mind and its beliefs were held to be.

Similarly, the physicality of Italian ritual in a period that viewed individual and collective humanity through the lens of evolutionary theory was seen as the sign of religious atavism.<sup>8</sup> In *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*, Robert Orsi has chronicled the development of the *feste* in honor of the saints and the Virgin Mary that were celebrated in Italian Harlem beginning in the 1880s, during which elaborate processions transported the statue of the Madonna or saint through the neighborhood and into the church, a practice that attracted the scorn of American Catholics and Protestants.<sup>9</sup> The spectacle of the great Mount Carmel parade usually consisted of thousands of marchers winding their way through Italian Harlem “trailing incense and the haunting sounds of southern Italian religious chanting” (6). A major component of these ritual celebrations, which

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<sup>8</sup> Vecoli reports that “the folk religion of the *contadini* did not accord with the standards of religious conduct prescribed by the Church in the United States,” and that “Americans, Catholics and Protestants alike came to regard the Italian immigrants as little better than pagans and idolaters,” *Prelates and Peasants: Italian Immigrants and the Church*, 233.

<sup>9</sup> Vecoli records a passage in a Jesuit journal that reflects the prevailing attitudes of American Catholics: “Piety does not consist in processions of carrying candles, in prostrations before a statue of the Madonna, in processions in honor of patron saints of villages, but true piety consists in the daily fulfillment of the religious duties exacted of us by God Almighty and His Church [. . .] In these points, no matter how numerous be the Italian processions, no matter how heavy the candles, no matter how many lights they carry, the Italian immigrant seems very deficient,” 234.

incorporated Italian folk practices dating back to ancient times, was a focus on the body. The body of the statue was often fabulously decorated with jewels<sup>10</sup> and pinned with dollar bills as offerings, while followers who sought healing of bodies wracked by pain and disease used them to express their gratitude, penance, and devotion. Many of the faithful walked barefoot, or on their knees, on scalding July pavement from neighborhoods as far away as Brooklyn. Many bloodied their own faces and walked with disheveled hair (8). Women carried enormous tiers of candles as part of vows made to the Virgin in exchange for her favors. The greater the favor asked, the heavier the candle to be born by the body. Booths lined the sidewalks full of ex-voto offerings, wax replicas of internal organs, limbs, ears, and eyes, which could be carried in the procession and placed at the Virgin's feet in gratitude for a miraculous healing. Upon arrival at the church, many penitents could be seen crawling up the steps on their hands and knees, "some of them dragging their tongues along the stone" (4). If the body was injured and bled as a result, the sacrifice was deemed even more efficacious (Primeggia 20).

Of the *festa* of the Madonna del Carmine, Orsi writes, "For the entire history of the devotion, this celebration of a woman, in which women were the central participants, was presided over by a public male authority" (53). Orsi's comment signifies an important way in which the ritual practice related to the Madonna manifests both the centrality of the female body to the religious culture of the community and the hidden power of the matriarchy lying beneath a veneer of male privilege. The Madonna image

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<sup>10</sup> The importance of the Madonna's body to southern Italian Catholic religious belief and the intimate connection between her body and the bodies of the faithful is expressed in the sacrifices made by impoverished Italians to honor it as well as the offerings of representations and paraphernalia of wounded bodies laid at her feet. Orsi describes the first gown of the Madonna del Carmine as "decorated with rings, watches, earrings, and chains, all given to her by men and women who believed she had helped them in a moment of terrible difficulty or pain; and her statue [. . .] was surrounded by canes, crutches, braces, and wax body parts left there as signs of their gratitude by people she had healed." *Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> St.* 12.

was the primary model for Italian women in East Harlem who became, like their female intercessor, the essential link between the family and religious devotion in a community that was overwhelmingly male. In Southern Italian immigrant communities, which were, due to a history of ecclesiastical misuse of power in Italy, notoriously anticlerical, men rarely participated in organized ritual observance. Thus, the small numbers of women in the community were responsible for fulfilling the family obligations of ritual practice: receiving communion, going to confession, having children christened and confirmed, and saying the Rosary (Ardito 144). Within the home, through rituals performed at domestic shrines with vigil lights continually burning before images of the Virgin and other saints, women also maintained the territory of what Orsi calls the *domus*, the family sphere, which was the true center of southern Italian religion and the subject of intense anxiety regarding its integrity on the western shores of the Atlantic. Orsi describes East Harlem as a community in separation, where families were divided in the pursuit of prosperity and where a continual fear persisted that “family structures and norms would be eroded in the experience of migration,” either by failure to find work or by the breakdown of the bonds of love and commitment through time, distance, and exposure to a new society whose social controls did not correspond to those of traditional Italian society (24-5). As she fought to maintain the *domus* as a sacred precinct, the Italian woman was the keystone in the arch of Italian religious experience in America.

Along with the obligation to connect the immigrant community to the sacred, the female body was expected to conform to the Madonna image of purity, self-sacrifice and

unconditional love.<sup>11</sup> Orsi reports that the women of Harlem, an area with one of the highest rates of disease and infant mortality, worked under atrocious conditions at flower-making and dressmaking both at home and in dark and poorly ventilated factories, where they were frequently made ill by vapors from glues and dyes, only to leave work in order to cook and clean for large extended families that often included boarders (28). In particular, the bodies of young women became an obsession within the domus-centered community. As Orsi writes, “all the community’s fears for the reputation and integrity for the domus came to focus on the behavior of young women” (135). Indeed, the female Italian body was closely identified with the body of the Virgin Mary and served as a special vehicle for the sanctification of the Italian community and for defending it against the anxieties and ambiguities of immigrant life in a society perceived as both alluring and corrupt.<sup>12</sup> Two novels written by Italian immigrants—one in the early years and one at the close of Italian immigration—use ritual to create a somatics of purification in which the female body, through its identification with the Madonna, becomes the venue for the exorcism of aggression that threatened the integrity of the Italian body, the domus, and the Italian community at large.

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<sup>11</sup> Ann Corneilson recounts an incident when a young midwife in a New York hospital attributed the stoicism of Italian women in childbirth to the fact that “peasant women feel less pain and suffer less from what they do feel than ‘other women.’” Such prejudice against immigrant women fails to understand the expectations they faced in their daily lives. *The Women of the Shadows: Wives and Mothers of Southern Italy*. (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 2001) 110.

<sup>12</sup> The films of Italian American director Martin Scorsese continue this preoccupation with the female body as icon of purity in a corrupt and violent world in need of redemption. His first major film—*Mean Streets*—includes a religious procession through Little Italy and part of the plot focuses on the Madonna/whore complex Italian men project onto Italian women. In addition, *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, and *Casino* all involve male characters who suffer a passion of sorts, which takes place in connection with a woman presented as angelic and ethereal who is often first seen dressed in white.

Bernardino Ciambelli, whom Italian scholar Martino Marazzi calls “the father of Italian-American immigrant novels” (52), wrote *I misteri di Bleeker Street* in 1899 as part of a series of *feuilleton* novels modeled after Eugene Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* (27). Sue’s urban novels with real-life characters embedded within a fictional narrative of crime and intrigue appealed to many immigrants in the United States, prompting a minor explosion of this genre in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The *mysteries* novels depicted life in the slums, with improbable but exciting plots designed to reveal the true life of the urban immigrant to the uninitiated.<sup>13</sup> Ciambelli, a journalist, playwright, and actor, was a major figure in Little Italy and well known to Italians across America through his many contributions to Italian journals (such as the *Bollettino della Sera*, which he founded in 1898), the most important of which were his serialized novels (28).

Aimed at an educated immigrant audience with a taste for the sensational, Ciambelli’s novels, which his obituary in *Il Progresso* described as “a faithful representation of the feelings of our great immigrant masses, in a period of confusion, before they settled into a new and in a certain sense hostile country” (qtd. in Marazzi 27), are not novels of assimilation but of the embattled immigrant community as it experiences what Rene Girard has called “the sacrificial crisis”—the pollution of the social body by violence resulting from the undermining of social boundaries perceived as sacred by that society and which always requires the ritual sacrifice of one of its members as the means to purification (16). According to Girard, “it is not the differences but the loss of them that gives rise to violence and chaos” (50). Rituals are essentially acts of

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Heinrich Bornstein’s *The Mysteries of St. Louis*, Emil Klauprecht’s *Cincinnati, or the Mysteries of the West*, and Baron von Reizenstein’s *The Mysteries of New Orleans*.



sacrifice “to offer protection to those who find themselves in the path of the ritual impurity—that is, caught in the floodtide of violence” (30).

Ciambelli’s novel reveals New York’s Little Italy as the very type of community Girard describes: one plagued by a loss of moral bearings, the violation of sexual boundaries, and continual crimes of violence between family members and between members of the Italian community. Most of the crimes committed in the environs of Bleeker Street consist of assaults upon the body, which is variously subjected throughout the novel to beating, drugging, poisoning, shooting, stabbing, drowning, and rape. On Bleeker Street, Italian crime organizations prey upon other Italians, and opium dens house orgies conducted by persons of questionable sexual orientation, thus embodying the blurring of traditional formulations of good and evil, of insiders and outsiders. In this novel, Ciambelli uses in particular the bodies of women, either assailed by evil or the tools of evil, as iconic battlefields for the struggle between purity and pollution in Little Italy. The novel, structured by an international adventure plot that ranges among New York, San Francisco, Uruguay, Cuba, and, of course, Italy, tells the story of the beautiful but coldly evil Iole Rains and her plot to kill her father and her equally beautiful but innocent sister Ada in order to inherit their father’s fortune.

The conflict in the novel turns on the purity of the body and blood relationships within the domus, and reflects Ciambelli’s awareness of ethnic discrimination against Italians both inside and outside the Italian community. The blond and blue-eyed Ada is the daughter of Civil War hero William Rains and his Florentine wife Pia, while Iole is the daughter of Rains’ first wife, a gypsy, who was impregnated by a gypsy king before she lured the unwitting Rains into marriage, thus making Iole neither Rains’ daughter nor

Ada's sister. The novel was written during a period when the Italian social body was the object of the intense nativist analysis represented by Dillingham's *Dictionary*, leading to the stereotype of the southern Italian as a darkly primitive, knife-wielding anarchist, an image that northern Italians themselves often fostered. In *I Misteri*, Ciambelli, a native of Bagni di Lucca in northern Italy, creates a family of "good" characters from the North while strategically using the bodies of the dark gypsies Iole and her father Mino to receive the negative projections of the southern Italian stereotype. Not a single Italian in Bleeker Street ever wields a knife—only the gypsy. Neither does any Italian ever willingly commit a sexual indiscretion—only the gypsy, the Irish, and the American; yet the contamination of sex and violence symbolized in these alien bodies shakes the structure of the stable society sought by the simple working people of Little Italy, requiring the sacrifice of a pure Italian woman in order to restore the community to health.

Ada Rains, whom Iole and her American accomplice Otis drug and leave for dead in a fire in the Union Bank, miraculously survives and goes to live incognito with the family of Clara Alberti, another pure and innocent northern Italian woman, who works at a flower factory in Little Italy. Clara later falls in love with the socialist poet Aurelio, who has recently emigrated from Milan. They marry and have a child. Immediately thereafter, Clara discovers that many years earlier, Aurelio's mother was seduced by a soldier and left to raise her only son alone. This soldier later went on to marry Clara's mother, thus making Clara and Aurelio half-siblings and, thus, guilty of incest. The unintentionally incestuous union of Clara and Aurelio, while appealing to tastes for sensational literature, also reflects a deep anxiety within Little Italy regarding

contamination from insidious forces that cannot be predicted or controlled.<sup>14</sup> Clara, who learns of the secret first, protects her husband from the truth, bearing the secret in silence, her body succumbing to the corruption of her sin as she weakens and finally dies.

In the funeral of Clara Alberti, Ciambelli creates a major ritual event that dignifies and purifies the Italian body, which, though it was perceived as impure, was in a larger sense innocent because it was subject to forces of evil in a new and incomprehensible society. Ciambelli first describes the ritual procession into the church, as the workers who loved Clara pull her funeral carriage through the streets of Little Italy by hand to the Church of the Madonna of Pompei. The procession illustrates Bourdieu's logical shorthand of ritual to construct the body of the Italian laborer as the performer of a saving act as it moves the embodiment of communal pollution toward the sacred temple of the undefiled woman, the Madonna. More importantly, Clara's funeral cortege is a type of the Madonna's *festa* procession, reflecting the Italian community's representation of its values to itself and subtly creating an unspoken relationship in the mind of the reader between the body of Clara and that of the Madonna. The defilement and purification of the immigrant body is implicitly linked to the unstained purity of the Virgin Mary, thus elevating the immigrant body through its identification with the iconic body of the Madonna while at the same time admonishing the immigrant to maintain the boundaries of the Sacred in the midst of the Profane.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Incest, according to Girard, along with patricide and fratricide, is one of the primary symptoms of a society experiencing loss of degree. Additionally, Walter Benn Michaels' *Our America* describes the importance of the symbol of incest in novels such as Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* in relationship to prevailing nativist beliefs of the period.

<sup>15</sup> Enrico Sartorio wrote *Social and Religious Life of Italians in America* in 1918 to depict the experience of Italians from the point of view of a fellow countryman. Concerning the importance of ritual to the Italian in a culture perceived as profane, Sartorio writes "In place of the [. . .] Festa Patronale (the feast of the patron

During the funeral itself, Ciambelli also uses the body of the crucified Christ hanging over the altar as the icon of the broken immigrant body and the broken social body of Bleeker Street, a relationship he makes explicit by having this “huge Christ of bloody tears, with a head reclining on a wounded and tortured breast,” gaze at the body of Clara and appear to “smile with affection at the angelic creature who awaited absolution in the immobility of death at the foot of the altar” (279). As the priest consecrates the bread and wine and the body of Christ is sacrificed again for, and with, the bodies of the immigrant community, all are united in the sacred Corpus Christi. The symbolic movements of the priest and parishioners of Bleeker Street as they communally eat, drink, kneel, and cross themselves before the iconic bodies of Clara and Christ construct the mythico-ritual space of which Catherine Bell has written and, in turn, create a ritualized social body which, having internalized unspoken schemes involving its own beleaguered state, its internal corruption and need of purification, and the proper boundaries between the Sacred and the Profane, can now begin its movement out of the ordeals that have assailed it. The funeral mass also empowers the social body through the *opus operandum*, the efficacious rite, by which the immigrant body, though often powerless in the daily toil of American life, is theologically endowed with the power to transform the world through sacred ritual, the ultimate manifestation of “the fitting action.”

As the priest dispenses holy water upon the body of Clara and the crowd, and chants absolution “in the midst of a great anguish that invaded everyone, causing a spasm

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saint), America offers to the Italian man the curse of the saloon, the poisonous atmosphere of cheap moving pictures, and the dangers of the slum dance hall. In Italy we know the difference between a peasant who has lived there always and one who has spent a few years in America and then gone back. The former is poorer but the latter is quite rotten.” 22

of emotion,” the symbolic purification of the Italian social body in the house of the Madonna is complete (280). At the end of the ceremony, the priest addresses the congregation saying, “For her who now enjoys the glory of Paradise, do not cry, but sing hymns of gratitude. For those who remain below—you must now bear the tribute of grief for this good soul, and gratitude for her holy resignation to the will of the Highest” (280). Ciambelli’s funeral, coming almost mid-way through the novel, becomes an expression and exorcism of the “great anguish” that has imperiled the social body, a gift of absolution and grace, and an exhortation to endure the burdens and deprivations of immigrant life without sacrificing the “will of the Highest,” the sense of the proper boundaries between the Sacred and the Profane created by and inculcated through the ritual operations surrounding the sacrifice of the contaminated innocent.

From the moment of the funeral, the action slowly, though very circuitously, begins to move toward the vindication of the community and the final purging of evil, which does not fully take place until the death of Iole, who is shot by her Italian husband while she is keeping a tryst with a gypsy lover. Because Iole is the embodiment of the alien evil that threatens the community, her death occurs without any of the ritual observances given to Clara. Ciambelli records no funeral, nor is her grave marked or visited until the end of the novel, when the ritual of marriage between the three central couples removes the onus embodied in the corrupt and transgressive Iole, and reestablishes the sacredness of the female body in Little Italy. The compassionate Ada, now safe, kneels and prays at her “sister’s” grave in an act of forgiveness, and the purity, order, and stability of the domus is restored. Ciambelli’s ritual somatics thus express the anxiety and suffering of the Italian immigrant community while purging it of violence

through the sacrifice of an immigrant body exalted in its identification with the iconic bodies of Christ and Mary.

During the years between Ciambelli's novel and the end of the great wave of immigration, the Italian community in America underwent a number of crucial changes as it became established. Although it was still plagued by problems of poverty, unsanitary conditions, crime, overcrowding, and disease, Orsi reports that between the First World War and the late 1920s, Italian Harlem "matured into a self-aware and politically sophisticated community" and assumed political control of its own destiny through figures like Fiorello LaGuardia, who first became a Congressman for East Harlem in 1922 (Orsi 45). At the same time, the community became divided by its varying responses to the idea of material success. Many Italian residents slowly improved their circumstances, which often meant they moved out of a neighborhood they viewed as degraded in the eyes of society, while others feared that material success would destroy the values that held the social body together (91). Additionally, the Italian community brought to the United States an already potent myth of "Lamerica," developed by immigrants who had returned to Italy, a myth that equated the Statue of Liberty with the body of the Madonna and viewed American dollar bills as sacred objects fit to attach to the garments of religious statues (Ardito 133).<sup>16</sup>

Garibaldi LaPolla, a first-generation immigrant who eventually became a figure in the public education system of New York, was only two years old when he immigrated to America in 1890 (Peragallo 138). His novel *The Fire in the Flesh* reflects the changes and tensions within the Italian community at the time he wrote the novel in 1931.

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<sup>16</sup> Ardito states the Statue of Liberty was sometimes called "The Madonna of Liberation" 133.

LaPolla's novel indicates that the social controls symbolized by the body of the Madonna had begun to weaken during his lifetime as more Italians achieved material success and the domus absorbed elements of American styles of behavior that conflicted with traditional Italian models. Thus, *The Fire in the Flesh* makes explicit what was only implicit in Ciambelli's novel.

Further, *The Fire in the Flesh* exemplifies the theories of Mary Douglas, who, borrowing from Basil Bernstein, describes the highly structured "positional family" that the Italian domus typifies as one of the kinds of communities that depend on ritual observance to maintain a rigidly fixed social structure. In contrast, the American society to which the Italian immigrant was exposed corresponded to what Douglas describes as the "personal family," one that advocates informality, intimacy, and fluidity of social roles as conducive to social mobility. *The Fire in the Flesh* reveals the anxiety of the Italian community brought on by its encounter with the American model of the domus necessary for a society dedicated to personal achievement. This new model necessarily weakened the social controls embodied in the Madonna symbol of female sanctity, resulting in a reformulation of the Madonna as the Madonna of liberation through material success. In LaPolla's novel, the stresses within the Italian community are not embodied in outsiders who bring impurity into the community but are due to the Italian quest to "make America," which, when conducted by a female Italian protagonist, becomes an especially serious sin against the original Madonna image—an image which, in turn, undermines the American project through its inappropriateness to its new setting.

Lapolla's novel, like Ciambelli's, engages in ritual somatics that address questions regarding the loss of social boundaries and controls through the symbol of the

Madonna. *The Fire in the Flesh*, however, explores this dilemma through the conflict between the type of female purity idealized in Ciambelli's novel, which subordinated the instincts of the body to the values of the soul and was central to the maintenance of the community, and the Madonna of success connected with the Lamerica myth. He does this chiefly in an important ritual celebration through which he sets up the conflict between these two models that will drive the action of the novel, revealing the paradox of Italian devotion to an ideal feminine image that is burdensome but nevertheless crucial to the survival of the immigrant community.

The novel begins in a southern Italian village, where a group of peasants observes the Feast of the Annunciation through the type of ritual procession that will become integral to the *feste* celebrated by Italians in Little Italy. LaPolla's description focuses on a troupe of peasant bodies carrying a heavy, unstable statue of the Madonna. They struggle under the weight but are united in the performance of the holy task of bearing the body of the Mother of God into the sanctuary:

The huge image of the Virgin almost toppled from the shoulders of its bearers as they shoved their way in the front. [. . .] The procession was a motley queue—a fantastically uniformed band with a sprinkling of musicians in homespun. Women in heavy shawls sweating under the burden of candles, often too huge even for their peasant robustness. Hard shambling men, their backs bent. Priests in full vestments dragging their cassocks in the hot dust. Little girls and boys swaying censers. The enormous clay image of the Madonna oscillated in her palanquin, beaded and befringed and heavy with silks, bestudded with medals, laden with money offerings pinned in great profusion over its sides. [. . .] The tired men who



carried it made no attempt to hide their relief as they bore the revered image down the long aisle of the cathedral, while the rest of the procession filed behind, the band silenced, the whispers hushed, the tread of feet softened in the mild gloom. (4)

LaPolla's procession depicts the encoding of positional roles, as the peasants enact the symbolic shorthand that ritualizes Italian bodies to labor together in their pilgrimage through life toward a sacred resting place and (especially for women) to uphold the sacred values of the Holy Woman. At the same time, it anticipates the conflict between spiritual values and the aggressive pursuit of material success as those who try to shove their way in front risk toppling the Madonna from her perch.

As the procession deposits the statue of the Madonna, which LaPolla describes as a frightened young girl with her child, we encounter her real-life counterpart in Agnese Filoppina, a local girl whom the village priest has impregnated and who has now defiantly brought her newborn son, whom she delivered alone "in the grottoes," into the church to confront the father. The people are shocked at the news, but rather than blaming the priest, they locate the sin in the body of the young girl and ostracize her. Because the community cannot include a female body that operates outside the rigorous standards of feminine purity associated with the Virgin Mother, Agnese is forced to emigrate to America with her father, brother, and a husband of convenience—Michele, the village fool, who has loved her since childhood.

Never again will the Italian social body in the novel be as united as it was in its struggle to bear the Madonna's body into the church. The rest of the novel is a downward spiral resulting from Agnese's conflation of the divine task enacted in the procession of

the Annunciation with the project to “make America,” her attempts to reformulate the Madonna image amid the ambiguity of the New World, and the disruptive effects her actions have upon the domus.

Orsi has noted that the cult of the Madonna in Italian Harlem rooted itself in the interstices between the expectations of women’s power and the realities of it. In Lapolla’s novel the fire in the flesh is the immigrant quest for power in America, a pursuit of material success that perverts the holy materiality symbolized by the Madonna’s body. In Agnese, whose vision of making America requires the acquisition of power usually reserved for the male in Italian society, the traditional Madonna image becomes distorted beyond all recognition. For instance, Agnese rules the family with an iron fist and refuses to show affection to her own son for many years. She pursues the outward trappings of the Madonna statue in the form of wealth and status, which isolates her from the social body, and a strange form of sexual purity by living with a man she does not love, an arrangement that increases her physical and spiritual isolation from her own body.

Only late in the novel does Agnese exhibit any of the Madonna’s traditional traits, but these traits in their new setting only serve to compound her misery. After being reunited with Father Gelsomino who has defrocked himself and come to America in order to chastise his flesh through hard labor, Agnese finally realizes that her adolescent desire for the socially sanctioned purity brought by marriage kept her from being with a man she truly loved. Her husband Michele, however, stabs Gelsomino in the culminating scene acting out of an intense jealousy of the man who has claimed his wife’s affection for so many years. Agnese, seeing that her husband has mortally wounded Gelsomino, prays to the Madonna; then, in an attempt to save her husband from prison, she stabs him

to make it appear that he was only defending himself from her former lover. Her husband is exonerated, but his body then falls prey to his hatred for his wife, and he loses his ability to speak or move. Agnese, now chastened by her experience, attempts to conform to the old Madonna model even further by taking over his care as her penance. At the same time, she realizes that her devotion to the now infantilized Michele, locked into his silence and immobility but with his memory intact, makes him all the more miserable. When Agnese's brother tells the old family servant that Agnese and Michele have become like animals gnawing at each other in a trap, she shakes him indignantly and insists that he pretend that all is well or things will be "like real hell" (346).

The traditional image of the Madonna carried on the back of the peasant no longer seems to work in a world in which the *domus* and the social body are caught between the models of the Old World and the New World. Those who pursue the New Madonna embodied in the Statue of Liberty risk destroying the sacred integrity of the *domus*, while those who are ritualized to perform according to the inner logic expressed in cultic devotion to the traditional Madonna risk becoming trapped in a false and sterile existence that fails to achieve the liberation envisioned in the Lamerica myth. Through his use of the body in the ritual of the Feast of the Annunciation, LaPolla shows the ironic beauty of the immigrant's adoration of the iconic female body of the Madonna, which, although it served to unify the community, embodied a logic that had no place in the pragmatic project of making America. The heavy image of divine female perfection carried on the backs of ordinary human bodies may be too much to bear in the new American milieu; yet, the spiritual task signified in the ritual movements of these bodies gives them a dignity and a sense of community that was sorely needed in the theologizing

experience of the American pilgrimage. At the same time, the ritual procession in which the Italian body is subordinated to an image made of clay tricked out with finery earned by the sweat of those who labor to carry it—a self-created and illusory vision of perfection—foreshadows the often tragic Italian service to the American Madonna of material success. Just as the ribbons and lace of hard-earned peasant decorations hide a clay statue, the vision of America and the immigrant self in America will give way to a reality of such ambiguity that the willingness to carry the burden of either image will inevitably result in confusion and alienation.

The rituals in these Italian novels depict the encoding of the schemes and logic of social controls upon the individual body and the social body in a somatics that lays bare those controls to the public gaze. Both novels locate ritual practice in connection with the female Italian body under the icon of the undefiled Divine Woman to work out the tensions and anxieties facing the social body regarding its own level of purity. In LaPolla's novel, however, these schemes show signs of wear and tear as the model of the personal American family with its fluid pattern of identity that allows for the pursuit of commercial success infiltrates the positional model of the immigrant family. These Italian novels subordinate assumptions about the purity of the Italian body by native-born Americans to perceptions within the ethnic community itself.

Like their Italian counterparts, Jewish immigrant writers also turned to the use of symbolic bodies in ritual practice to accomplish purposes related to the purity and dignity of the immigrant body. In the novels of Jewish immigrants, however, the issue of the purity of the body is much more explicitly addressed, partly because of a Jewish heritage which emphasized ritual purity, but also because of a long history in which the Jewish

body was constructed by non-Jews as not only impure but also as weak. This history often forced Jews like Boas who wished to achieve outside the pale of Jewish society to disembody themselves as Jews.

A German Jewish immigrant, Boas always represented himself not as a Jew but as a German;<sup>17</sup> yet he spent a great deal of time measuring and critiquing the Jewish body. “Much to my surprise,” he writes concerning the possibilities of transforming the Jewish body to the “American type,” “an important change in type may also be noticed in the East European Jews, which race was particularly the subject of our inquiry; the race is very short headed, but there is a decided tendency to an increase in length of head among the later immigrants” (*Letter to J.W. Jenks*, 3 September, 1908 207). Boas’ comments reveal a preoccupation common among American nativists and Western scientists in general with the Jewish body as anomaly and as a space of deficiency. Indeed, Sander Gilman, who has written extensively on non-Jewish stereotypes of Jewish bodies, maintains that:

The construction of the Jewish body in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is linked to the underlying ideology of anti-Semitism, to the view that the Jew is inherently different [. . .] The difference of the Jewish body is absolute within Western tradition; its counterimage (from the comments of Paul, Eusebius, and Origen on the “meaning” of circumcision) is the “Christian” body, which

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<sup>17</sup> Leonard Glick, “Types Distinct from Our Own: Franz Boas on Jewish Identity and Assimilation.” *American Anthropologist* 84 (1982): 545-565. Glick provides a fascinating discussion of Boas’ complex position on Jewish immigration, which “advocated assimilation to the point of literal disappearance for Jews,” a position strangely at odds with the cultural relativism of his anthropological theory.

eventually becomes secularized into the “German” or “English” body with the rise of the modern body politic. (*The Jew’s Body* 38)

Gilman’s comments suggest that the very problem of the immigrant Jewish body was complicated by a perception of difference rooted in a ritual practice—circumcision—that was itself based upon an intense awareness of the religious importance of the body and designed to set it apart as consecrated space. This resulted in a double bind for the Jewish immigrant, for although the Jews have been characterized as a people of the Word, a great deal of traditional Jewish ritual practice centered on the body and bodily fluids, with a highly developed ritual practice surrounding the hair and beard, fasting, food preparation, the use of phylacteries and other types of ritual objects and clothing, ritual purification of women after menstruation, and elaborate rules for the treatment and handling of the body after death. Because it was central to Jewish religious observance, no matter how a Jew might wish to assimilate the body to American norms, to make it disappear, he must, if an observant Jew, engage in activity that insisted on the body as *Jewish* body. Thus, if an immigrant wished to leave his Jewish body behind, it often meant he must abandon ritual practice; yet the very conditions of Jewish life, both before and after immigration, often degraded the body to the extent that ritual practice was the only medium by which it could experience legitimacy, dignity, and healing.

Jews were often better equipped than many other ethnic groups for the hardships of immigrant life because they had known nothing different in their previous experience. Yet, the living conditions of overcrowded and unsanitary tenements and the working conditions in dimly lit, poorly ventilated, and often stifling sweatshops exposed the Jewish body to suffering in a grueling and unvarying routine that was especially difficult.

Irving Howe reports that the conditions of life on the Lower East Side were such that tuberculosis, the most feared disease of the time, grew to such proportions that in 1906 it afflicted twelve out of every one thousand Jews living on the East side and came to be regarded as “the Jewish disease.” Howe also states that illnesses caused by overwork—neurasthenia, hysteria, and nervous breakdown— frequently led to serious physical consequences. Suicide, for example, while infrequent in Europe, became a serious problem among Jews in America due to the stresses of dislocation and disorientation (149). Yet, rather than arousing sympathy, the Jewish body was often the target of disgust and blame for its weakness, as in the case of an article appearing in the *North American Review* in 1908 that used the illnesses of poverty among Jews to justify the argument that New York crime rates were rising because Jewish immigrants, whose bodies were unfit for labor, were more inclined to turn to a life of crime (135).

These types of judgments constructed the Jewish body according to the perverse logic which had resulted in the Eastern European migration to America to begin with, since the tragic pogroms in which the bodies of Jews were massacred in unprecedented numbers arose out of anti-Semitism and fears of Jewish participation in subversive activities against the Czar. Many first-generation Jewish immigrants and immigrant writers carried with them fresh memories of the slaughter of their co-religionists and of European constructions of the Jewish body as ugly, deformed, and diseased—the outward sign of inward Jewish perversion—which made such violence against it possible. Many of them had also absorbed a sense of the Jewish body “so deeply impacted by anti-Semitic rhetoric that even when that body met the expectations for perfection in the community in which the Jew lived, the Jew experienced his or her body as flawed,

diseased" (Gilman 179). For example, Russian immigrant writer Elias Tobenkin frequently makes use of the Jew's hatred of his own body by stressing its stooped and inferior quality, which he claims is due to the excessive regimen of Talmudic readings practiced by orthodox Jewish boys and the strictures of ghetto life, while in *The Fugitive* Ezra Brudno recounts the taunts of Gentile boys who ridicule the gait of his protagonist Israel Abramowitch as he walks down the alleys of his Russian village.<sup>18</sup> These writers echo the beliefs of many Jewish professionals of their time, which were a mixture of unconscious non-Jewish notions about Jews as carriers of the corruptions of urban life and a desire to show those corruptions to be the result of social causes rather than signs of an inherent physical, and thus mental, deformity.<sup>19</sup> Gilman succinctly sums up the situation when he states that "being black, being Jewish, being diseased, and being 'ugly' [had] come to be inexorably linked" (173).

As the writing of Jewish immigrants attests, the pre-immigration battle over the Jewish body was often fought in the arena of ritual practice, as conflict over forced baptisms reflected both the degree to which the body mattered to the Jew and the degree to which Christian ritual practice was used to legitimate racial constructions of the Jewish body and to purify and transform it to Gentile norms. Significantly, Mary Antin devotes several pages in *The Promised Land*, her memoir of her complete personal transformation through the purifying waters of the American baptismal font, to the horror with which

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<sup>18</sup> In Chapter Two of *The Jew's Body*, Sander Gilman discusses the Jewish foot as the sign of Jewish physical and mental pathology in European medical discourse: "[the] theme of the weakness of the Jews' feet (in the form of flat feet or impaired gait) becomes part of the necessary discourse about Jewish difference in the latter half of the nineteenth century" (40).

<sup>19</sup> Gilman also discusses medical treatises written by Western European Jews of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which accepted non-Jewish assessments of the Jewish body, but in an attempt to divert prejudice toward Western Jews as carriers of the corruptions of the city, projected it onto Eastern European Jews, linking physical "deformity" to their excessive use of tobacco (*The Jew's Body* 38-59).



Jews regarded the baptisms that were often forced upon them by Christians. Antin writes at length about the kidnapping of Jewish boys by agents of the Czar, boys who were then reared in Gentile families until they could serve in the army, during which time they were continually coerced by priests, often through torture, to accept baptism. Some were flogged and starved until they submitted. Antin cites the particularly poignant case of a boy known to her father who was tortured and locked in a cell until he fell asleep only to be told upon awakening that he had been baptized in his sleep by priestly incubi. “[T]hey held it to him he was a baptized Jew, and belonged to the Church,” Antin writes, “and the rest of his life he spent between the prison and the hospital, always clinging to his faith, saying the Hebrew prayers in defiance of his tormentors, and paying for it with his flesh” (11-12). Of her own defiance, Antin, who in tones that give us pause considering her later attitude toward her American “baptism” in the Melting Pot, declares: “there was no pain that I would not bear—no, none—rather than submit to baptism” (11).

Antin mentions another pre-immigration controversy involving ritual practice and the body in the problem of the Blood Libel: the belief among Christians that Jews ritually sacrificed Christian children in order to drink their blood during the Passover meal. This belief was widespread and caused many persecutions in Passover season, during which the bodies of Jews were frequently made to pay for the bodies of Christian children they had supposedly sacrificed in their perverse rites. The myths about Jews associated with the Blood Libel conflated Gentile fears of Jewish blood and miscegenation with the supposed Jewish lust for blood, fears that were confirmed by then-current medical journals that claimed one drop of Jewish blood was enough to completely contaminate an

Aryan (Gilman 175). The significance of the Blood Libel is reflected in the novels of several Jewish immigrant writers, perhaps attempts on one level to quell fears regarding the danger of the Jew to America through immigration. The Blood Libel takes on major proportions, however, in a novel entitled *The Fugitive*, written by Ezra Brudno. In this novel, the treatment of the Blood Libel becomes much more than an unfounded rumor that needs to be dispelled. It becomes, rather, an integral part of Brudno's somatics and represents the convergence of Jewish and Gentile attitudes toward the Jewish body, the Jewish social body, and the complex tensions between them. Brudno, in a profound strategic move, turned to the iconic body of Christ to reflect the tensions of Jewish experience and to reconstruct the Jewish body as sacred in the public imagination.

*The Fugitive*, published in 1904, was one of three novels written by Brudno, a Jewish immigrant from Lithuania who eventually lived and worked as a lawyer in Cleveland. Brudno's novel, set in Lithuania and America, uses ritual as a means of interrogating somatic constructions of the Jewish body through a surreal series of events that conflates the myth of the Blood Libel with the Christian rite of baptism. The novel recounts the search of the orphaned Israel Ambramowitch for a physical and emotional home. After the arrest and execution of his father on suspicion of the Blood Libel, the young Israel is rescued from the forest and brought up by the Gentile Judge Bialnik, the very man responsible for his father's death. Judge Bialnik's beautiful daughter Katya becomes Israel's childhood playmate. When the two fall in love as young adults, Katya's father forces Israel to leave the house rather than allow his daughter to marry a Jew. The two are later reunited as adults, at which time Judge Bialnik finally relents and allows Israel to marry his daughter if he will first be baptized. The lonely Israel suffers the same

anxieties expressed by Antin over choosing to accept a Christian ritual that has long exemplified the oppression of the Jewish people. Throughout the novel, Israel's quest to remain true to his religion is contrasted with the actions of his degenerate brother Joseph, who coolly accepts baptism in order to marry the daughter of a prosperous Gentile officer. While Katya assumes that the ritual of baptism will impose no moral dilemma for Israel, he laments the tendency of Christians to dismiss the deep connection in ritual between the spiritual and the somatic when he declares "They do not realize that faith, if it only exists, is rooted deep in one's heart, and the one that sometimes extirpates it tears it out often with flesh surrounding it, and the wound keeps on bleeding until there is heart no more" (248).

In a chapter entitled "The Burden of the Cross," Israel experiences a waking dream in which he is united with the crucified Christ in a vision of Jewish suffering that leads to his reclamation of his own people. At a deeper level, this vision and the events that follow it begin a reconstruction of the body of Christ as a Jewish body, and, thus, the Jewish body as a sacred vessel of suffering for all humankind. Brudno first describes Israel alone in his room, staring at the fire as he broods over his decision to be baptized. As he gazes at a glowing ember, it gradually comes to resemble a man on a cross. Upon looking at it more closely, he realizes that the face of the man is his own. The vision then changes to the gorgeous Vladimir Cathedral, one of the holiest shrines in Kiev, lit by thousands of candles. As bells toll and thousands of people pour into the Cathedral, Israel hears someone whisper, "A Jew is going to be baptized" (241). When a priest begins the rite of baptism, the ghostly figures of an elderly Jewish man and woman with horrified eyes appear before him. They point silently to the right, and the cathedral becomes dark.

A volcanic flame suddenly erupts from underground, and the priests kindle a huge bonfire, all the while chanting a sad devotion. In a chilling anticipation of events of the 1940s, Brudno describes an old Jewish man and a young woman being brought forth to be offered up as a burning sacrifice. As they prepare to die, they both continually chant “Hear, O Israel, God our Lord, God is one.”

The ghostly woman then points to the left where Israel beholds a river on the banks of which stands a crowd of terrified Jews. One of them steps into their midst and addresses the crowd. While some of the listeners protest, some begin nodding with satisfaction. Horsemen soon appear in the distance, and “old men, women, maidens, little children threw their heads back and the flashing knives were passed over their necks hurriedly. [. . .] The crowd became smaller and smaller and the number of corpses with ripped throats grew larger and larger. A long stream of blood flowed into the river” (244). In a vision that recalls moments in Jewish history like the mass suicide at Masada, the Jewish body becomes the vehicle through which the Jew must do violence to himself in order to express any sort of power in the world. At the same time, Brudno raises the dimensions of the ritual sacrifice of the Jewish body to cosmic dimensions through a comparison with the iconic body of Christ on the cross and prepares the way for his use of the Christian ritual of baptism as a transformative re-immersion in the blood of the Jewish people that will restore Israel in all senses of the word.

Brudno’s disturbingly surreal vision is fulfilled a few days later as a pogrom breaks out in Vilno and the streets fill with the blood of slaughtered Jews. Israel staggers through streets piled with Jewish corpses, eventually stumbling upon a young Jewish woman being raped by Polish *muzhiks*. When a voice from within suddenly commands

him to defend his people, Israel immediately picks up a sharp iron and begins hammering the skulls of the rioters, telling us, “I craved to see blood, to wash myself clean with blood, to submerge myself in blood. I struck heads and breasts and shoulders with the rage of a demon and blood gushed forth abundantly. ‘Baptise your Jewish soul with blood,’ a weird-like voice whispered to me. And I did bathe in fresh, hot human blood” (253).

In this passage Brudno plays on the symbolic frontiers between the Jewish Passover and Christian baptism to turn the tables on the whole Christian symbology of baptism. First, the passage evokes the Judaic underpinning of the Christian rite of baptism: its symbolic connection between immersion in the blood of the Jewish Christ with the escape of the Israelites from bondage through the Red Sea. The reader also is confronted with subtle messages regarding the Christian religious debt to Jews and to the suffering of the Jewish body. These tacit associations widen further into the larger question of the Jew’s place in the American Promised Land, since Israel will immigrate to America shortly after this baptismal Passover from bondage to Christian hegemony through the Red Sea of Jewish blood.

At the same time, the events of the pogrom take on the taxonomies underlying the historical cycles of sacrificial violence connected with the Blood Libel. Brudno makes it clear that, contrary to the myth of the Blood Libel, the Jews are the recipients of Christian violence rather than the perpetrators of violence against Christians. Yet, he also risks depicting a Jew who refuses to do violence to his own body in expiation for wrongs against Christians, or as an expiatory sacrifice for violence within the Christian community, as Girard’s theory of sacrificial violence would suggest, but is willing

instead to use violence against his oppressors, thereby defiantly taking on the guilt for spilling Christian blood. The deliberate movement from the problem over baptism to the dream vision, in which the ritual of baptism becomes the self-sacrifice of the Jewish body, to the pogrom, which reclaims the roots of Christian baptism in the body and blood of the Jewish Christ, reverses the order of power in the Christian rite of baptism and the Blood Libel, and thus reconstructs the Jewish body as both powerful and capable of violence.<sup>20</sup>

These ritualized events reactivate Israel's sense of Jewish identity and loyalty to his ethnic and religious heritage. Although he meets and marries Katya in America years later, Israel never accepts baptism, insisting on an intermarriage that maintains the religious boundaries forged in his tragic experience in Vilno. Israel chooses to live marginally, claiming the cross of Christ as the instrument of the sacrifice of the Jewish body, as he tells Katya: "The cross, my love—the cross I bear weighs heavily upon me" (391). Brudno's use of ritual somatics continues an early form of multicultural debate that arose in the mid-nineteenth century Jewish project to write a counter-history of Christianity from a Jewish standpoint. Beginning in the mid-1800s with the work of Abraham Geiger, Jewish religious historians reversed the Christian gaze at the Jew and began to recast Christianity as dependent on Judaism out of what Susannah Heschel has called "a Jewish desire to enter the Christian myth, become its hero, and claim the power

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<sup>20</sup> The concerns of Israel Abramowitch adumbrate the problems of Robert Cohen in Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises*. Cohen's obsessive dedication to boxing reveals his need to defy stereotypes of the Jewish body as weak: "There was a certain inner comfort in knowing he could knock down anybody who was snooty to him" (3). Cohen takes pride in his broken nose as a badge of physical prowess, but Hemingway promptly undercuts this sign of Jewish power by submitting it to non-Jewish aesthetic values, adding, "it certainly improved his [Jewish] nose" (3).

inherent in it” (Heschel 110). The central concern of much of this movement toward Jewish self-empowerment lay in the reconfiguration of Jesus as a Jew (109).

The late nineteenth-century Jewish project of religious counter-history is continued in the work of Edward Steiner, whose similarly complex preoccupation with the figure of Jesus shows the influence of Brudno’s earlier novel. Steiner, however, who became a Congregationalist minister, professor of Applied Christianity at Grinnell College in Iowa, and a sociologist of immigration, considered the figure of Christ from the perspective of a Jewish convert to Christianity. *The Immigrant Tide*, one of his accounts of his many travels in steerage with immigrants traveling back and forth between Europe and America, contains a particularly poignant chapter entitled “The Price They Pay” in which Steiner describes the battered bodies of the immigrants returning to Europe with envelopes full of money for their families after toiling for long periods in America. Some are blind. Some are crippled. Some die of tuberculosis on the voyage. In his description of the working conditions of immigrants, Steiner relates that ten thousand immigrants in the preceding year died in the mines alone and describes the toll taken on the immigrant body:

I could see the mouths of half a dozen mines, out of which were dragged in one year the mangled, powder-burnt asphyxiated bodies of a thousand once-breathing souls. I heard the cries and groans of hundreds of women and thousands of children; for I have seen mothers embrace bodiless limbs and limbless bodies, fragments of the sons they had born, and although 30,000,000 dollars and more were carried home by the living, they too had paid a price beyond the hard labour

they did. In the suffering they endured in damp mines, by the hot metal blasts,

in cold ditches and in dark and dangerous tunnels, they paid the price indeed. (44)

Steiner draws a parallel in this chapter between the body of Christ and the immigrant body in whom “He incarnates himself”(39); yet, the same book contains a much more ambivalent chapter entitled “The Jew in the Immigrant Problem” in which Steiner presents pictures comparing Jewish facial features of the “poorer” and “finer” types and attributes the prejudice directed toward Jews to their unwillingness to work at hard labor, their intolerance of Sunday laws, and their questionable “oriental” business methods. Steiner considers these and other characteristics of his own people as detrimental to their prospects of assimilation, never once mentioning the fact that he himself is a Jew.

Like Boas, then, Steiner writes as an assimilated European American contemplating the problems of outsiders from the perspective of an insider persona that refuses any recognition of his own ethnic identity. Steiner does reveal himself more fully in other books, however, particularly in *From Alien to Citizen* (1914), an autobiographical account of his emigration and assimilation that conflates Americanization and Christian conversion. In this book, Steiner describes the anguish he experienced before his conversion in a way that reveals his sense of the intimate relationship between the spirit, the body, and the social body for the Jew: “Should I cut myself loose from a race and its traditions, and in doing so wound all those who were flesh of my flesh?” (291). In general, however, Steiner shows considerable ambivalence regarding Jewish ethnicity throughout his work, on the one hand working toward a social gospel for the immigrant and claiming that he opposes anti-Semitism (330), while on the other asserting that “the Jewish Type when very pronounced” is “disagreeable,” and



calling for immigration from Eastern Europe to cease entirely (*The Immigrant Tide* 285).<sup>21</sup>

Although Steiner's autobiography devotes only a few paragraphs to his personal dilemma over conversion, his novel *The Mediator*, published in 1907, concerns itself entirely with a Jew who converts to Christianity and suffers continual physical and mental anguish for his decision. Unlike Steiner himself, however, his protagonist explicitly reclaims the body of Christ for Jews and elects to live a much more difficult life on the frontier between Judaism and Christianity, a decision that Steiner may not have found possible to make in his own life. The action of the novel is continually punctuated by ritual moments. Like Lapolla, Steiner opens the novel with a ritual procession—this time in connection with the Feast of Corpus Christi—to set up the central somatic concerns of the novel: the misconstruing and abuse of the Jewish body by Christians, and the revision of the iconic body of Christ as a Jewish body that can incorporate both Christians and Jews. Most importantly, however, Steiner uses the ritual of Communion, the symbolic sacrifice of the body of Christ to reclaim Christ as an image of the Jew and thus the icon of *Jewish* suffering. Steiner's complex attitude toward the body of the Jewish Christ reveals a deep ambivalence regarding his Jewish heritage and his decision to disembody himself as a Jew.

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<sup>21</sup> Steiner goes on to state, "[The Jew] presents too solid a differentiated group, will retard proper adjustment and increases existing race antagonisms. His attitude towards the manifestation of the religious spirit in our public schools, his intolerance towards certain religious practices which are fundamentally ethical and social, but not necessarily sectarian, will more and more alienate those Americans who have been most hospitable towards him and upon whose good will he is dependent economically and socially, if not politically. [. . .] [A]nd if the Jew is as shrewd as he is painted, he will look to their healing; while if the American is as charitable as I think him to be, he will give the Jew full time for reconvalence." 288-9.

*The Mediator* recounts the story of Samuel Cohen, the only son of the Levite Abraham Cohen, the last of a long line of priests who are central to Jewish religious practice. Samuel is born in the Russian village of Kottowin on the highest Jewish holiday, the Day of Atonement, thus establishing his priestly role in the reconciliation of Christians and Jews. Samuel's mother dies in childbirth, forcing his father to find a young woman to nurse his infant son. Because there are no Jewish women who are able to nurse Samuel, due to the poverty and hunger of the Jews in the village, Abraham turns in desperation to a young Polish woman, Suszka, with the plan to have her first eat kosher food and wait a few hours before nursing the infant Samuel so that her milk will be pure according to Jewish law. When he arrives with her at his house, however, the baby is crying so hard from hunger that Abraham forgets the ideal of ritually clean food and allows the Gentile Suszka to nurse his son immediately. This episode recalls one from Steiner's own life recounted in *From Alien to Citizen* in which he tells of having had a Slovak nurse and being vaccinated with virus taken from the arm of a Slovak boy "whom I called brother by vaccination," which "made me feel kin to these Gentiles" (*From Alien to Citizen* 25), and indicates that, just as it did for Steiner, what has gone into the Jewish body will have a significant effect on the spiritual life of Samuel Cohen.

Suszka, who lives with the family from then on, becomes a mother to Samuel. As Samuel grows up, he begins to chafe at his Jewish religious practice and the rigidity of his father's views, which he feels are calculated to "shut in the boy's little soul and keep the joy of God's world out" (*The Mediator* 45). At Passover, he feels particularly unhappy, when "during and after the meal, there were long prayers, bitter herbs, and memories of the hard days when Israel was in captivity: all this, while meaningless to the

child, oppressed him” (44). While visiting Suszka, Samuel surreptitiously enters a Christian church for the first time during the ritual of the Easter mass. The beauty of Christian ritual and the orderly procession of the bodies of the acolytes up and down the steps to the altar make a dramatic impression on the young Samuel, who immediately dreams of becoming a Christian priest and leaving behind what he feels to be the disorder and cacophony of Jewish ritual practice in the synagogue (47-8).

As time goes by, Samuel’s relations with his father and other members of the Jewish community in Kottowin become strained. Suszka is forced to leave the household because it is rumored that she is “Christianizing” Samuel. An authoritarian aunt comes to take her place and shows him none of the love that Suszka did. His father forces him to read the Talmud for long hours, a practice that Steiner describes as stultifying for a young boy, and Samuel continues to grow up without the love and joy that his soul craves. When the czar allows Jews to attend public schools and the village of Kottowin is connected to the outside world by railroad, Samuel’s eyes and heart are opened by his first exposure to novels and poetry, which his father forbids, in an attempt to force Samuel to devote himself to his religious heritage. At one point, his father becomes so angry at Samuel’s lack of interest in reading the Talmud that he knocks him unconscious. Dr. Rosnik, a secular Jew, is called in. Rosnik advises Abraham to give up his insistence on Samuel’s Talmudic training and to focus on sending him to college instead. In a troubling yet poignant admixture of religious skepticism, European constructions of the Jew as diseased, and Steiner’s own feelings about his heritage, Rosnik tells Abraham of Heinrich Heine’s description of a hospital in Hamburg where people were suffering from three diseases: bodily ill, old age, and Judaism. “He was right, Reb Abraham,” Rosnik

continues, “and, to my mind, Judaism is the worst disease of the three, since it is incurable” (68); “Bodily ills can be cured by physic; old age doesn’t hurt always; but Judaism can’t be driven out by physic nor by baptismal water; it hurts all the time outside and inside” (71). He goes on to tell Abraham that he did not have his son circumcised because he “did not want to put a mark on his body which would make him suffer all his life” (73) and that Abraham would do better to advise his son to go to America and make money. This will give Samuel real power, which the moribund rituals of Judaism cannot provide because soon the rituals of Judaism will no longer matter in a rapidly modernizing world.

Abraham cannot change, however, and Samuel becomes so unhappy that just as he is preparing for the ritual of Bar Mitzvah, at which time he will become an adult member of the Jewish community, he runs away to see Suszka. While he is on his journey, he meets a kind monk who walks with Samuel and defends him when some Gentile boys abuse him, saying that because Jesus was a Jew the relatives of Jesus should be treated well. Later, Samuel sneaks into the village church to hear the monk preach and again feels transported into a better, more beautiful world than the one he knows. The monk preaches about Love, something Samuel has not been able to experience in his own worship. After the mass, Samuel tells the monk about his newly awakened soul and his desire to enter the monastery. The monks immediately have him baptized and, through special permission of the Pope, allow him to enter the monastery at thirteen. Samuel never returns to his father, who, upon learning of his son’s decision, dresses himself in sackcloth and ashes in ritual mourning for his lost son.

The novel resumes the action fourteen years later, when Samuel, now an ordained priest of the Catholic Church, is preparing to celebrate his first mass. The Polish nobility, however, have decided to use the ritual of Communion as a lesson for the Jews. The mass is to be celebrated in the church in Samuel's hometown of Kottowin, and the procession has been ordered to pass through the Jewish quarter, and by the synagogue in particular, where the band plays "the Jew march." Samuel, who knew nothing of this edict, is humiliated and saddened. When they arrive at the church, Samuel, who is now known as Brother Gregorius, feels a sense of impending doom as he prepares to celebrate the holy Eucharist. The face of Christ on the cross appears to him as his father's own face, rebuking him. As he lifts the host to perform the mass, someone shoots at him. Samuel faints, only to be awakened by Dr. Rosnik telling him to get up and show he is unharmed. Samuel manages to complete the mass, but

[t]he ceremony which he performed was to him like the real dying of the Lord, and he felt as if he himself were on the cross, and that a spear had pierced his side. [ . . . ] All Brother Gregorius felt was the broken body and the spilt blood. The miracle of transubstantiation had taken place, but the Lord was dead in his own heart, buried in the tomb. (109)

In the ritual moment, theology and counter-history are one in a new form of transubstantiation, as Samuel's body and the bodies of all Jews are merged with the body of Christ, the very symbol used to signify the Jewish body as different.

In a manner similar to that of Brudno, Steiner drives his point home further as the Christian ritual sacrifice of the Jewish body leads to its ironic reenactment in the village of Kottowin, where a bloody pogrom against the Jews immediately ensues in retaliation

for the “shooting” in the church, an act which was arranged by the nobility as a pretext for punishing the Jews. The Jewish quarter is burned, and the Jews of Kottowin are massacred. Samuel, now reawakened to his heritage, accuses the nobility of arranging the pogrom and declares himself a Jew who will live and suffer with his own people. In a paradoxical passage reminiscent of *The Fugitive* that may reveal some of Steiner’s own unexpressed feelings, Samuel unleashes a tide of rage on the Gentile community for their acts of violence against Jews, swinging a large crucifix, the icon of Christian martyrdom, to beat the Christian tormentors of the Jewish community.

While Samuel manages to drag his father out of a burning house, Abraham, despondent in his old age, without a son to whom he can pass on the priestly legacy, tells Samuel that his son is dead. Now homeless, the Jews of Kottowin, including Abraham, emigrate to America. Samuel is left behind, broken in body and spirit, in the care of Suszka, but he will eventually emigrate and start a new life as well, now as a Jew but under the new name of Gregorowitch.

Steiner’s use of the ritual of Communion and the ensuing pogrom engages in a somatics that annihilates the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity, revealing the Jewish body of Christ as the site of the suffering and martyrdom of the Jews, and its deep connection, through its suffering, to Christianity and the rest of humanity. In the communion ritual, the Jewish body is both dignified and defended by its political and theological use as the Jewish Samuel Cohen, born on the Day of Atonement, acts as priest in breaking and offering the body of the Jewish Christ in a Christian ritual of atonement that reunites him with his own Jewish body. Samuel will later continue his religious quest in America. Unlike Brudno’s Israel Abramowitch, however, Samuel will

refuse to live solely as a Jew but, instead, will attempt to live in the margins as a mediator between Judaism and Christianity, opening a Jewish/Christian mission and settlement house as part of a Tolstoyian vision that seeks to imitate Christ through service to the poor. Samuel's marginality will earn him the vilification of both Christians and Jews, but he will willingly accept their opprobrium as part of his mission to include both Christians and Jews in the body of Christ.<sup>22</sup>

Steiner's somatics work to elevate the status of the Jewish body in the American mind, perhaps to accomplish in a fictional mode something that Steiner was unable to do in the more scientific mode of his sociological discourse on immigration. The ritual somatics of both Steiner and Brudno, carried on in the context of a Christian nation that bore the imprint of the body of Christ through foundational texts like Winthrop's, attempt an audacious social and theological task as they boldly raise up a competing definition of the body of Christ in the people of Israel, even as they make a plea for the incorporation of the Jews into the mythic American Body of Christ.

Finally, in one of the saddest and most radical uses of ritual somatics, Abraham Cahan turned to the body of the father as the icon of Jewish patriarchy to shape the tragic contours of his 1917 novel *The Rise of David Levinsky*. In a long career at the *Jewish Daily Forward*, Cahan continually defended the Jewish body, and, although a Socialist, Cahan was sympathetic to the ritual practice of Jews as an important medium for cultural preservation and political empowerment (Howe 112), often writing in the persona of a *maggid*, a traditional Hebrew preacher, on matters of socialism in order to appeal to the

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<sup>22</sup> Steiner had met Tolstoy several times and frequently acknowledged the impact Tolstoy made on his life. One of the most important effects of his encounter with Tolstoy was his pacifism during World War I, for which Steiner experienced a great deal of public acrimony.

religious sensibilities of his audience (111). In his autobiography *Bleter Fun mein Leben*, Cahan recalls the Sabbath rituals in his Lithuanian town of Vilno with reverence and gratitude:

The synagogue was in the far corner of the courtyard. Coming toward it, I could perceive the hanging candelabrum, its candles burning brightly, and the proud men of the congregation washed and clean in their Sabbath clothes. Then the Sabbath was like a fresh, new blossoming. I could feel it in my bones.

Often, my father would tell me about the neshomah yeseroh, the supplementary soul which descends on Sabbath eve for each Jew. I would feel it in the service and afterward at home. I would feel the beauty in the synagogue—beauty for the eye and the ear and the heart. (36)

He also describes the Sabbath celebration at home in a moving passage that reveals an intertwining of memories of his father and the religion of the Fathers that would prove significant in *The Rise of David Levinsky*:

A holy aura surrounds the white tablecloth and the shining candlesticks with their glowing candles. My father paces back and forth across the room, excitedly singing a Sabbath song, and it is then that it seems I hear his neshomah yeseroh singing. I can hear it in his song. I can see it hovering over the candlesticks. (37)

In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Abraham Cahan draws upon his memories of ritual and its emotional significance to tell the story of a man whose existential unmooring is partially the result of childhood confusion over the interpretation of a significant ritual moment—the funeral of his father. The first significant memory that David recalls in the novel is also his first encounter with death. Although he was only two, David was



brought at the age of two to recite Kaddish over his father's shrouded body, according to Jewish law. Jewish ritual observance requires setting the body apart and treating it as holy in death, with prescribed rules for touching, washing, positioning and clothing the body. As part of the Jewish belief that everyone is equal in death, all of the deceased are clothed in the same garment—a simple white shroud, which is meant to symbolize purity, simplicity, and dignity (Lamm 3-8).

David remembers standing beside his father's body and associates the experience with the holy due to the power of Jewish ritual, which requires the body to be enclosed by burning candles in a sacred space upon the floor. David tells us, "I was unable to fully realize the meaning of the ceremony, of course, but its solemnity and pathos were not altogether lost on me" (4). David's recollection of this moment gives us important insights into a major event that underlies many of his actions, as well as David's later difficulty in interpreting his own experience. In the mind of the child David, the vision of his father's body covered with the shroud becomes the symbol of both the presence and absence of the father, and of the Jewish body, a paradoxical vision of the World of the Fathers that will later lead to David's own simultaneous advancement and diminishment. His fascination with his father's shrouded body subsequently becomes a fascination with his father's coat, which he recalls pulling over his head, shutting his eyes and imagining "a flow of fantastic shapes, bright, beautifully tinted, and incessantly changing form and color. While the play of these figures and hues was going on before me I would see all sorts of bizarre visions, which at times seemed to have something to do with my father's spirit" (5).

For David, the coat serves to recall his father, but as a type of the death shroud, it also recalls the father as blank. In the literal world of the child, to recall the father means to imitate the father and to obliterate his own body with the coat just as the shroud obliterated his father's body. Thus, the ritual means of dignifying the Jewish patriarchal body becomes linked in David's mind to its disappearance. The cloak of the father is the death shroud and becomes the symbol of David's quest to obliterate the Jewish body, the Jewish self. "The Jew," Gilman writes, "[. . .] has but little choice: his essence, which incorporates the horrors projected onto him and which is embodied (quite literally) in his physical being, must try, on one level or another, to become invisible" (236). David carries this pursuit into his American project as he turns the desire for the lost father into the quest for the cloak on a large scale, becoming one of the nation's leading cloak manufacturers. In the new American setting, the cloak becomes even more a symbol of the obliteration of the Jewish body as David cuts his forelocks, disguises his own ethnicity with American clothes, and does his best to keep his hands still when he speaks—all in pursuit of the cloak.

The egalitarian nature of the ritual shroud is also ambivalent in the novel. On the one hand, David makes the cloak available to all through mass production, yet the mass production of the garment indicates the perpetuation of the conforming identity that David has adopted. On the other hand, in his personal life David uses the cloak and the money it brings as a symbol of status, which separate him both from his heritage and the common man. He never succeeds in finding love and family stability, drifting uneasily between unsatisfying images of the commodified version of love Kevin White describes and the rigorous but anchoring married life of Jewish tradition. Thus, as is the case with

many Jewish immigrant novels, the absence, alienation, or death of the father signals the loss of the patriarchal values that will eventually lead to the kind of moral confusion that marks the life of the wealthy David Levinsky, a man who seems, more than any of the protagonists of immigrant novels, to suffer a tragic impoverishment from the loss of ritual, what Mary Douglas describes as “the loss of articulation in the depth of past time” (41). At the end of the novel David, who now belongs to a German Jewish synagogue “chiefly because it is a fashionable synagogue” (528), mourns the loneliness born of his estrangement from his cultural roots with a final wistful memory of “the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher’s Synagogue” (529)—the Jewish body, ecstatic in ritual practice.

William Boelhower has remarked that in contrast to the Europeans who arrived in the New World armed with cartographical representations of geographical ownership, the Native American owned only the territory of his body (*Through a Glass Darkly* 61). One could argue that when the immigrant arrived in the New World, these roles were reversed: the newcomer’s body was the only *terra firma* on which he could stand, the only space, at least at first, that he could attempt to call his own; yet, like that of the Native American, the immigrant body was heterotopic to the Anglo-American cultural vision of American space. An uncomprehending gaze constructed the immigrant body as tenement; yet to leave that tenement behind, like Levinsky, Steiner, or Boas, often meant a difficult existence outside the House of their Fathers. In their different uses of ritual somatics, which insist upon the value of the body and of corporal knowledge to American experience, these immigrant writers performed a compensatory service to American letters and anticipated novels of the late twentieth century such as those of Leslie

Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday, which continue the use of ritual somatics to incorporate the ethnic Other into the American social body and to reunite the spirit and the flesh in American culture.

## Chapter Two: Ritual Space and the Immigrant Quest for Place

At Chicago's Columbian Exposition of 1893, which proudly touted the World's Parliament of Religions as the first public interfaith dialogue, the visitor, having viewed the icons of American progress in the White City, could exit the building and stroll down the mile-long Midway *Plaisance* past recreations of Celtic and German villages toward the exhibitions at the bottom of the strip, where the complexions of the inhabitants on display became progressively browner, the clothing stranger, and the atmosphere more purely commercial. On "Cairo Street" the visitor might have paid a small fee to enter the Temple of Luxor and watch the ancient rites of Ammon Ra, or stood in the bazaar for the Jewish observance of Yom Kippur, where the *Shema* struggled to be heard amid the clang of distant cymbals, the beat of tom-toms, and the band music from the German village (Seager 28). Moving still farther from the White City, the visitor could observe a Java priest performing a wedding or funeral ceremony for the inhabitants of his "village" or watch an Inuit priest sacrifice a bull (27). Humorist A.J. Dockarty gave an account of this spectacle of rituals in accents reminiscent of Huck Finn, writing about Hindus and Muslims "all rigged up in sheets and pillar cases" (176). When the Muslims face Mecca to pray, the "innocent" rustic exclaims, "You can't tell whether they're at prayer or a dog fit, but I suppose it's all the same in Arabia" (qtd. in Seager 211). At the very bottom of the Midway, farthest away from the White City, stood the booths of Africans and Native Americans who performed their sacred rituals for a motley throng of the curious, the indifferent, the horrified, and the mocking.

Richard Seager has described the Columbian Exposition as an American sacred space, "a disposable sanctum sanctorum for [the] religion of civilization, and an

ideological landscape built upon the classical, Christian, and patriotic signs at the core of the Columbian myth” (11). Indeed, the Columbiad was less the site of a religious dialogue than a visual monologue, the layout of which proclaimed the sanctity of a utopian Anglo-American space through the symbolic interweaving of the moral, the religious, and the ethnic, where in descending order on the “evolutionary scale,” racial groups considered too primitive for inclusion in the White City performed “strange” rituals for a carnival crowd hungry for, yet contemptuous of, the exotic.

As Seager explains, “The White City revealed white, mainstream America’s preferred image of itself, but the Midway *Plaisance*, a living ethnographic display that formed a second part of the Exposition, revealed America’s image of the rest of the world” (24). For the immigrant who may have attended the Columbiad, and who *was* the rest of the world, this spectacle of ritual performance might have felt oddly familiar, for these religious devotions, perceived as entertainment by an uncomprehending crowd, poignantly reveal in microcosm the attempt by the ethnic Other to “place” himself by means of ritual within the socio-cultural landscape of America. In this landscape the immigrant often suffered a chronic sense of dislocation even as he disconcerted the native born, who in turn adopted cartographical strategies that located the immigrant outside the sacred center of America and reduced his living religious practice to cultural artifact. Immigrant writers such as Louis Forgione, O.E. Rølvaag, and Elias Tobenkin frequently depicted the sense of dislocation and liminality experienced by immigrants as well as their attempts, through ritual, to create a sacred immigrant place out of American space, attempts that were often, paradoxically, ambivalent and only partially successful. In textually performing their rituals for the reading public, these writers recognized that

“sacred places are always highly charged sites for contested negotiations over the ownership of the symbolic capital that signifies power relations” (Chidester and Linenthal 16), and, thus, used ritual as a means of asserting a competing ideological map of geo-social space to resist “maps” like the Columbiad.

To decode the Columbiad is to appreciate the perennial human need to be placed—to be oriented through the creation of a place set apart from the homogeneity of space and time—as it would continue to manifest itself during the major period of immigration from the 1880s to the 1920s, a period in which many immigrants and native-born Americans perceived themselves as dislocated. David Jacobson has attempted to define the concept of place as follows:

“place” is a constant of the human condition. The search for place [. . .] is the search for locating the self in the infinite universe of space and time. The question of place, beyond territorial imperatives, is what distinguishes humans from other creatures. The temporal and spatial dimensions of place also indicate why the metaphysical dimension, large and small, from God to icons, from theology to the spatial tempo of funeral rites, is part of the definition of life. (92)

All human beings need to feel “placed” in time and space. Furthermore, as Jonathan Z. Smith has argued, the sense of place is bound up with the experience of two very different types of space—the locative and the utopian. Smith defines locative space as a metaphysical extension of the positional structures described by Basil Bernstein—that is, as a sacred *temenos* reinforced by the imperative of collective adherence to fixed positions within a larger scheme of things. By contrast, utopian space is unbounded, open, full of possibility, unattached to any particular location, and reachable only by

breaking the bonds of the prevailing social order.<sup>23</sup> The immigrants who came to America during this period entered an arena in which these two types of space were being reconsidered, redefined, and often were in conflict, partly because of the presence of the immigrants themselves and partly because of the ambivalence with which Americans experienced their own space. Thus, the Exposition was a cultural node at which the historically intertwined categories of the moral, the religious, and the ethnic were spatially schematized for the viewing public in a sacred space that served as a positioning strategy for locating the groups who built it by de-centering those it relegated to the Midway.

The Columbiad, at which the ritualized Other was barred from the sacred center of the White City, was in many ways a nineteenth-century manifestation of the original need for locative and utopian space experienced in the Puritan removal to the New World and the complicated relationship to space and place that the Puritan exodus created. Sacred spaces are not autochthonous, nor do they erupt spontaneously, as Eliade noted. Sacred spaces, and America surely is no exception, are constructed by human labor and are embedded with the politics of power, position, and exclusion. As Chidester and Linenthal maintain:

power is asserted and resisted in any production of space, and especially in the production of sacred space. Since no sacred space is merely “given” in the world, its ownership will always be at stake. In this respect, a sacred space is not merely discovered, or founded, or constructed; it is claimed, owned, and operated by people advancing specific interests. (15)

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<sup>23</sup> Smith provides a complete discussion of these concepts in *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990), 121-42.



Indeed, the Puritan removal to the American continent was in part a project to construct sacred space by expunging certain rituals from the spiritual landscape in order to delimit a Biblical territory in which the religious person could worship God free of what were viewed as the corruptions imposed by the practices of the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. The Puritan drive toward this new utopian space, resulted, however, in an especially intense experience of liminality, the space of “betwixt and between,” as Victor Turner has put it, which demanded some means of creating locative space. Puritan sermons, such as Robert Cushman’s *Reasons and Considerations Touching the Lawfulness of Removing out of England into the Parts of America*, written in 1622, powerfully depict the Puritan’s sense of being “displaced,” of having no fixed point of orientation in the world: “But now we are all, in all places, strangers and pilgrims, travelers and sojourners: most properly, having no dwelling but in this earthen tabernacle. Our dwelling is but a wandering and our abiding, but as a fleeting; and, in a word, our home is nowhere but in the heavens; in that house not made with hands” (27).

Cushman’s sermon poetically discloses the dilemma at the heart of the Puritan experience of liminality in America. Since “religions of transcendental hope tend to discourage the establishment of place” (Tuan 180), the liminal space extended for the Puritan both horizontally and vertically—a double consciousness of an experience of exile that urged the foundation of a home in the New World even as it compelled the Christian whose true home could never be found outside of the heavenly Jerusalem to remain a stranger on the earth. Thus, “there is that curious tension in [ . . . ] the Puritans, between the desire for *movement*, to progress historically in the drive to the millennium, and the desire to *order* the world, to conquer the earthly kingdom” (Jacobson 32). The

Puritan longed for the heavenly Jerusalem even as he labored to build it on earth. Both visions required that spatiality be coterminous with morality. This tension between the desire for utopian and locative space has continued in the American attitude toward place up to the present day.

The ambivalence at the heart of the American relationship to space was further complicated by the entanglement of the need for locative and utopian space with the original Puritan confrontation with the ritualized ethnic Other in the Native American, a confrontation which involved a collision of patterns of movement and conceptions of time used to demarcate space as place. As Jacobson notes, “The Reformation offered a radical reorientation to perhaps *the* central markers of human life—movement, space, and time. *Place* is the intersection of time and space, and place is demarcated through patterns of movement and settlement” (28). The Puritan attempt to sacralize American space in the cleansing wake of a radically historical, linear movement toward an apocalyptic future lay in direct opposition to the cyclical, repetitive, and fixed enactments that were characteristic of Native American ritual, which Puritans viewed through a lens clouded with anti-papist sentiment.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, as the topography of the Columbiad suggests, it can be argued that the collision of the Puritan creation of sacred place by means of a linear and historical movement *through* space with the cyclical and ahistorical repetition of movement *within* space that was characteristic of Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Native

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<sup>24</sup> *The Narrative of the Captivity of Mary Rowlandson*, for example, intertwines the liminality of her “wilderness condition” with Native American ritual practices that she interprets as the work of Satan in contraposition to the eschatological promise of salvation at the end of history. Of the Wampanoag rituals Rowlandson writes, “Oh the roaring, and singing and dancing, and yelling of those black creatures in the night, which made the place a lively resemblance of hell” (*The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Sixth Ed. Vol A. Ed. Nina Baym (New York: Norton, 2003). Rowlandson’s account of her resistance to Native American ritual practice is in essence a testimonial to the triumph of Protestant salvation *sola fide* over Roman Catholic salvation *ex opere operato*.

American ritual remained an unspoken theme in the dominant American spiritual narrative but became explicit again as the millennialism that arose with the evangelical movement combined with Anglo-American Nativism in a new confrontation with immigrant ritual. Thus, even as the immigrant experience of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected the same needs for utopian and locative space experienced by the Puritans, their correspondence in the American mind to the ritualized Other of Roman Catholic and Native American practice necessitated the same defensive strategies of exclusion that the Puritans used to locate themselves in the New World.

Although the national theological narrative delineated sacred space in a manner that was in many ways antithetical to the immigrant's ritual construction of place, the national *political* narrative allowed for—and even required—the use of civic ritual to create a sense of national boundaries within which the sacredness of human life was linked to civic order. Eric Hobsbawm has examined the tendency of newly emerging nation states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to use ritual as a means of creating a sense of national tradition and unity. America, in particular, faced the problem of creating a unified American territory after the Civil War out of the heterogeneity brought on by political conflict, urbanization, and immigration. Hobsbawm maintains that this was done primarily through an exchange of civic rituals whereby immigrants were urged to engage in the cult of the American national myth (by celebrating, for example, the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving), while giving up their own collective rituals (like St. Patrick's Day and Columbus Day), which might be absorbed, in turn, by the nation (279-80). That this exchange did indeed occur is exemplified by the rituals at the opening of the Columbian Exposition, which symbolically interwove the American Flag, the Statue

of Liberty, and Händel's *Hallelujah Chorus* in a ritual performance that universalized the amalgam of patriotic, classical, and Christian signs implicit in the Anglo-Protestant religion of civilization, while at the same time declaring Columbus Day, honoring the first "Italian-American," to be a national holiday (Seager 6).

While the cartographical strategy of location used at the Columbiad ordered American space in accord with an Anglo-American vision of optimism and a fairly benign use of social evolutionary and racial theories, the same sense of unease could give birth to horrific nativist visions like the following excerpt from Boston poet Thomas Bailey Aldrich's poem "Unguarded Gates" (1892), which uses a similar constellation of classical and Christian images in a meditation on the pollution of American space by invading immigrant groups:

Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,  
 And through them presses a wild motley throng—  
 Men from Volga and the Tartar steppes,  
 Featureless figures of the Hoang-Ho,  
 Malayan, Scythian, Teuton, Kelt, and Slav,  
 Flying the Old World's poverty and scorn;  
 These bringing with them unknown gods and rites,—  
 Those, tiger passions, here to stretch their claws.  
 In street and alley what strange tongues are loud,  
 Accents of menace alien to our air,  
 Voices that once the Tower of Babel knew!  
 O Liberty, white Goddess! Is it well

To leave the gates unguarded? On thy breast  
 Fold Sorrow's children, soothe the hurts of fate,  
 Lift the down-trodden, but with hand of steel  
 Stay those who to thy sacred portals come  
 To waste the gifts of freedom. Have a care  
 Lest from thy brow the clustered stars be torn  
 And trampled in the dust. For so of old  
 The thronging Goth and Vandal trampled Rome,  
 And where the temples of the Caesars stood  
 The lean wolf unmolested made her lair. (20-41)

In this passage, the speaker warns the white goddess of Liberty about invading hordes of ritualized immigrants, whose “unknown gods and rites” are paired with the claws of tiger passions, indicating the speaker’s perception of them as both irrational and powerful enough to defile the purity of sacred Anglo-American space symbolized in the white goddess.<sup>25</sup> The speaker’s anxiety about the corruption of the purity of American space by immigrant bodies reflects the primordial relationship between sacred space and the issue of purity, which has been the issue around which the contestedness of sacred space has revolved throughout the history of religion (Chidester and Linenthal 10).

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<sup>25</sup> In a letter to G.E. Woodberry in 1892, Aldrich described the writing of the poem and the feelings he meant to express in it as follows: “I went home and wrote a misanthropic poem called ‘Unguarded Gates’ in which I mildly protest against America becoming the cesspool of Europe. [. . .] My Americanism goes clean beyond yours. I believe in America for Americans; I believe in the widest freedom and the narrowest license, and I hold that jail-birds, amateur lepers [. . .] and human gorillas generally should be closely questioned at our gates. [. . .] Rudyard Kipling described the government of every city and town in the United States when he described that of New York as being ‘a despotism of the alien, by the alien, for the alien, tempered with occasional insurrections of decent folk.’” Greenslet, Ferris. *The Life of Thomas Bailey Aldrich*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1908), 168-9.

Aldrich's poem was only one of many nativist strategies for the defense of the purity of American space during the years between the onset of heavy immigration in the 1880s and the effective close of immigration in 1924. Legislative strategies included persistent attempts by nativist groups to reformulate legally the ethnic composition of American territory by means of the literacy test and a cunning use of census figures, beginning in earnest with the Immigration Act of 1882 and ending with the Immigration Act of 1924, which effectively ended Asian immigration completely and limited European immigrants to a quota of two per cent of the number of each nationality's total American population in 1890 (Higham 324). The 1924 bill was justified by an appeal to the duty to preserve a distinct American type, to keep America for Americans, and to save the Nordic race from being swamped by "lesser" races.

This rationale reflected the pervasive influence of eugenics, discussed in Chapter One, which can be viewed as another locative strategy practiced by native-born Americans. Numerous books, such as Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*, sought by means of "a crude interpretation of Mendelian genetics" overlaid with religious rhetoric to argue that the addition of new ethnic groups into American space threatened to destroy the moral virtue of the nation—because, when races mix, the higher type always reverts to the lower type (156). A form of literary eugenism also took possession of the minds of a number of American men of letters in the 1920s, to whose decrees immigrant novelists were likely to have paid close attention. Literary traditionalists argued that the body of American literature had become a contested space in which Anglo-American writers had a responsibility to defend its purity from the corruptions introduced by lesser races and immigrant parvenus like Theodore Dreiser whom H. L. Mencken, a voice of

tolerance, championed against a nation “engaged in a grotesque pogrom against the wop, the coon, the kike, the papist, the Jap, the what-not—worse, engaged in an even more grotesque effort to put down ideas as well as men [ . . . ] to give the puerile ethical and religious notions of lonely farmers and corner grocers the force and dignity of constitutional axioms” (qtd. in Elliott 314).

Mencken’s description aptly describes assimilationist movements like the “100 Percent American” movement, which arose during and after the war as yet another means of controlling the ethnic composition of American space according to a historical vision of an agrarian, Anglo-Protestant nation. Such movements often identified immigrants with an urban blight that could destroy the sanctity of the Jeffersonian model of Americans identified with the land. These fears were intensified by the vision of the closed frontier articulated at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Frederick Jackson Turner, which for the first time gave Americans a sense of limited space and raised questions regarding the criteria by which that space should be constructed and to whom that space should belong. Further, these movements sought to purify American space by cleansing the immigrants of contaminating Old World traditions, customs, and memories that divided their loyalties and made them susceptible to subversive movements. During this period the Americanization Committee overseen by Francis Kellor proposed requiring Americanization classes for foreigners and the deportation of any immigrant who did not learn English and apply for citizenship within three years (249). The American’s creed, emphasizing the duties of a loyal citizen, became a daily rite in the public school (205). The Americanization movement eventually gave way to post-war frustrations that resulted in a reactionary belief that aliens simply could not be assimilated and thus

supplied fuel for the fire to exclude immigrants by means of legislation (263). As the energy left the movement, what Higham calls the “tribalism” of the 1920s, with all of its attendant hysteria was free to emerge, as various nativist groups within the country sought some kind of familiar landmark in an increasingly unrecognizable territory.

The 100 Per Cent American movement also ushered in the birth of nativist secret protective societies that saw their task as one of policing American space. This phenomenon had begun in the late 1880s among lower middle-class workers who felt culturally and economically dislocated by immigrants. At first these organizations were confined to the Northeast and Midwest but, over time, spread to the West and South as well. For example, in 1891, the American Protective League was established in Omaha and, according to Higham, functioned during World War I “almost as an auxiliary of the Justice Dept,” searching for evidence against immigrants they deemed a threat to national security, which often consisted of gossip, rumor and hearsay, or suspicions aroused by the failure to buy Liberty Bonds (211-12). The Ku Klux Klan was the most intense expression of the confluence of fears regarding the integrity of American sacred space, religious fundamentalist Protestantism, and 100 Per Cent Americanism. The Klan launched attacks against Catholics and Jews, along with Negroes, as invaders of the sacred precincts of America, most notably during the period between 1915 and 1923 (293). The white-robed Klansman, then, was a dark manifestation of the same sense of the marginalization of Anglo-Protestant racial, moral, and religious dominance that was manifested in the layout of the Columbiad, combined with a rural fundamentalism that exacerbated the tendency of Protestant Nativism to “convert social and economic conflicts into religious and nationalistic ones” (82).



Indeed, almost all of the locating strategies practiced by native-born Americans during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were allied with Protestant Nativism, and the rhetorical modes of those strategies often partook of the same admixture of religion and ethnocentrism found in the Evangelical slogan “Christianization and Americanization are one and the same thing” (261), which motto also captures the old ambivalence of the Puritan, the simultaneous desire to sprint toward the Heavenly Jerusalem and to set up a New Jerusalem on earth. For religious immigrants, who often experienced the values of Americanization as in conflict with the values imposed by their religious beliefs, such slogans created unavoidable tensions, which they attempted to ease through a variety of ways, one of them being a faithful adherence to their rituals. In their presentation of these rituals in their fiction, immigrant writers took upon themselves the task of asserting a counter-cartography of America that used the same strategic interweaving of the religious, the moral, and the ethnic in the drawing of its contours.

The question of just how acutely immigrants to America experienced a sense of dislocation, and the severity of the needs that arose out of that sense, has been the subject of debate among historians of immigration. Founders of immigration history, such as Oscar Handlin, often depicted the immigration experience as one of alienation, marginalization, and disorientation. Handlin writes, “The whole American universe was different. Strangers, the immigrants could not locate themselves; they had lost the polestar that gave them their bearings” (86). Historians who followed, however, such as Herbert Gutman, took a different stance, insisting that immigrant experience was more marked by balance and continuity than Handlin had acknowledged and that immigrants

had effective coping mechanisms that they used to smooth the transition from one place to another (Gutman 43).<sup>26</sup> Immigrant novels indicate that both views are correct: Immigrants did experience a wrenching sense of displacement and anxiety in the face of trying to claim a piece of the American physical, social, and economic landscape, and they did use certain coping strategies to meet the needs that arose out of that sense of dislocation. Religious ritual was one of these coping strategies by which immigrants were able to make a complex exchange between different types of space and to create a sense of place in America.

First, the immigrant use of ritual occurred in the context of a subtle interplay between varying conceptions of utopian space. The immigrants who came to America felt its pull along with the expectation of unbounded freedom and possibility the new country offered. When they arrived, however, those visions of endless opportunity were tempered by the realities of life in America. The dehumanizing spaces they were forced to inhabit often drastically curtailed their sense of the possibilities of ever possessing the ideal place of their dreams. Along with their desire for a place in the new land, therefore, the immigrant developed a concomitant need for an *alternative* utopian space, an ideal world in which the strictures, hardships, and confusions imposed by the new world could be lifted, if only for a brief time, and the norms of immigrant culture could predominate.

In addition, for the newly arrived immigrant, the vastness, fluidity, and relativity of America must have caused something similar to the disorientation that Mircea Eliade describes as the “homogeneity of space”—the essentially undifferentiated quality of

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<sup>26</sup> Gutman notes the importance of wakes, saints’ days, funerals and burial rituals as strategies for the transmission and maintenance of ethnic communities in the New World. *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America*. (New York: Knopf, 1976), 43.

reality. In the fragmented environment in which the immigrants now found themselves, their need for locative space intensified. Many immigrants now needed the sense of enclosure, well-defined position, and secure boundaries that ritual provided in order to endure the trials of creating a new life in a confusing and latitudinarian society.

Finally, the immigrant had to achieve a sense of place, a sense of familiarity and intimacy with the new environment, through the introduction of memory and emotion into an unfamiliar territory. Following Kant, many humanistic geographers insist that the concept of place cannot be understood apart from considerations of the temporal and the emotional. Whereas space is connected with unrestricted freedom, place is defined as a locus of meaning, usually forged through the introduction of human feelings, values, and memories at the intersection of time and space. For example, Yi-Fu Tuan writes:

“Space” is more abstract than “place.” What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value [. . .] If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place [. . .] place is permanent and hence reassuring to man, who sees frailty in himself and chance and flux everywhere. (154)

Similarly, Allan Gussow points to the role of emotion in the creation of place when he states, “The catalyst that converts any physical location—any environment if you will—into a place, is the process of experiencing deeply. A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings” (30). Since the creation of place is directly related to the *intensity* of experiences rather than their *extensity* (Feibleman 55), ritually constructed space, set apart from the drudgery of life in the ghetto or the

monotony of the grassy plains, provided a closed precinct in which immigrants could create intimacy with their new environment through deeply felt experiences that could be housed in memory.

The rituals performed in the basements of Catholic churches in Little Italy, in tiny synagogues on the Lower East Side, or in makeshift sod houses on the western plains were immensely important mechanisms, which, through their strategies of formalized and symbolic spatiality, fixity, and repetition created a transcendent alternative utopian space, the security and order of locative space, and an emotional arena in which the immigrant could forge bonds with American space through the experience of the powerful but often unacknowledged emotions of hope, fear, guilt, and grief that were part and parcel of immigration. If ritual did indeed serve such an important function, it is important to examine how this was accomplished.

First, as many theorists have realized, ritual frames a point in time and space through the erection of imaginary boundaries. As the previous chapter established, this is done primarily through the movements of physical bodies that manipulate basic spatial distinctions radiating from the axis of the human body—up and down, right and left, inside and outside, center and periphery. Bruce Kapferer calls attention to the spatial aspect of ritual by describing it as “self-contained imaginal space” that creates an “‘invisible membrane’ that surrounds the action itself and sets it apart from the flow of everyday life while at the same time allowing for a pragmatic engagement with it” (516-518). In short, ritual frames an invisibly bounded and enclosed space through the movements of the body, much as a mime creates an invisible box through the positions of his hands against the empty air. The construction of ritual space through bodily

movement may at first appear to contradict Tuan's definition of place as "pause," yet when we remember, as noted above, that ritual movement is movement *within* a space enclosed by imaginal boundaries, rather than *through* space toward an apocalyptic future, we can recognize the symbolic movements of ritual as a kind of burrowing into place, movements of anchoring or rooting rather than of momentum.

Second, successful ritual, based as it is upon a strategy of privileged oppositions that differentiate ritual space and activity from the quotidian, creates the world "as it ought to be" (Chidester and Linenthal 9-10), a highly charged paradigmatic arena for enacting ultimate concerns as well as a protective area that provides the participant "another world to live in," which Santayana claimed is the primary purpose of *all* religion. Furthermore, this sense of the world as it ought to be can exist in varying degrees of tension with the world as it is. As ritual theorist Gerd Baumann has recognized, rituals, particularly in pluralistic societies, implicate others, whether they are directly or indirectly present. Rituals are used to "convey a message across a cultural cleavage to 'others' or to an outside 'public' and [ . . . ] this message is concerned quite centrally with reformulating the cleavage between 'us' and 'them'" (98). Thus, as part of the process of creating place, ritual can become a means of critiquing the space outside the boundaries it erects. This is especially important in the case of immigrant novelists who textually performed ritual for the reading public, playing upon and enhancing its critical powers.

Jacobson's definition of place as the intersection of time and space reflects a general consensus on the part of ritual theorists: that the unique experience of time in ritual is essential to the experience of place. Ritual locates the participant historically and

spatially through its subtle manipulation of what Gunter Thomas has called a “‘frozen’ autopoiesis of communication,” by which it utilizes the memories of its participants through the repetition of the same form of communication over large temporal and geopolitical expanses, thus becoming a “(meta)medium for the transcendence of a given space and time by ritualized communication” (336). Through repeated symbolic acts that trigger memories of other enactments, rituals provide a sense of security by connecting their participants diachronically and synchronically to a worldwide community that also connects innumerable points in space. In so doing, ritual establishes and makes comprehensible the place of its participants by connecting them across time and space with significant persons who also perform the same symbolic gestures, thereby making any single point a part of the translocal and transhistorical imaginal place created by ritual.

Finally, the use of imagination and memory in the ritual establishment of place inevitably connects it to the emotional realm. Thomas J. Scheff has written of the power of ritual “for coping with universal distress” by creating an aesthetic distance through its formalized symbolic gestures that enable participants to experience their own emotions without being overwhelmed by them (484-6). Similarly, Dorothea Lüddeckens has established ritual as a powerful vehicle for bearing and transforming large amounts of human emotional freight by means of “established culturally constructed and maintained systems of symbols—pre-formed ‘models of the world’ already associated with certain emotions” (570). The highly charged symbols and gestures of ritual, therefore, when united with memories of previous enactments of the same gestures, engender powerful

unconscious resonances and entanglements of place, memory, and feeling, creating intimacy with the point in space in which they are experienced.

A brief consideration of one depiction of Italian religious processions by immigrant novelist Louis Forgione can serve as a starting point for an examination of the ways ritual constructed place and provided the utopian and locative dimensions for its participants, as well as the ways immigrant writers could use their performances of their communities' rituals to bring important concerns before their audiences. Orsi has documented the role of the processional devotions to the Madonna and other saints in assisting the Italian community to achieve a sense of orientation in America through their ability to dramatize the emotional lives of their participants even as they "claim[ed] part of American space and American time" (189). A similar process is at work in the 1928 novel *The River Between*, which, like the novels of Ciambelli and LaPolla discussed in Chapter One, locates the immigrant struggle toward the ideal in the body. Forgione examines the unforgiving nature of the immigrant experience through two forms of physical bereavement—the masculine loss of power and the feminine loss of purity—in Italian Harlem. The novel depicts Little Italy as an overcrowded space of dirt, poverty, and ugliness, where the gas works on the river continually belch smoke and fumes while its inhabitants struggle continually with their failure to live up to their visions of the ideal and their sense of abasement and disorientation in a place they had believed would fulfill their dreams. The story centers on Rose and Demetrio, two immigrants whose great strength and passion is undercut by a deep sense of unworthiness and failure. Due to family quarrels and their inability to conform to Italian norms of behavior, Rose and Demetrio become homeless, living in exile across the river from their old community.

Demetrio was once a proud business owner, legendary for his physical strength, but, after many years in America, now blind and frail and estranged from his son, he loses himself in idyllic memories of Sicily. Rose, beautiful and sensual, has been unable to live up to the Madonna image imposed upon her by Italian society. Since she has been unfaithful to her husband, she has been deprived of communal supports and has had to resort to prostitution to sustain herself. In their loneliness and desolation, the two outcasts, doubly displaced in the American scene, meet again, and Rose takes in the now ailing Demetrio. Shortly thereafter, they encounter an Italian religious procession for a Calabrian saint, which Forgione describes as follows:

First marched two squat huskies arrayed in Sunday best, holding aloft a banner of violent hues. Numerous dollar bills pinned on it made a fluttering border around the pink face of the weeping saint. A dozen pompous personages followed, white ribbons on their arms and folded sashes aslant on their breasts. The leader held a sword upright, like a candle, and barked intermittent words of command.

Tranquil-eyed, pointing to a portion of the anatomy over which he holds especial powers, the saint followed, supported tremulously on a gilded pedestal by four bronzed paisani. The rabble came next: women, children, in overcoat and shawls, bearing lighted candles, preceded by a small but noisy band blaring forth the same music which it had played that morning at a gangster's funeral. (215)

Forgione here gives the reader a portrait in miniature of the hundreds of religious processions that created a sense of place for immigrants in Italian Harlem. The collective movement of bodies through the streets of East Harlem creates the invisible boundaries of Little Italy, a literal marking out of Italian territory, a locative space that positions the



immigrants according to an order they understand and relieves them of the disorientation brought on by the unfamiliar social order outside its boundaries. Furthermore, the highly charged symbolic activities associated with the devotion to the saint create a sacred space in which the world is “as it ought to be,” where the frailties of the flesh are assured the compassionate intervention of the divine, where the sword used to defend the community is also the candle of devotion, where “the rabble” are holy pilgrims, and where the music of the gangster is fit for a saint. In addition, through the ritualized repetition of the perennially enacted gestures of the Old World in the context of the New World, the procession transforms the space of New York into the ideal place of Italy as it is perceived through memory and the emotions attached to memory, thus allowing the immigrants to form a bond with American space by overlaying it with the veneer of the lost world. Forgione’s procession exemplifies Clifford Geertz’s definition of ritual as “some sort of ceremonial form—[in which] the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turns out to be the same world” (112). This is the essence of the complex transaction of space that immigrant ritual practice accomplished. Through ritual, they could claim a place in America while simultaneously maintaining citizenship in the world “as it ought to be.”

As recent theorists of place acknowledge, however, the creation of place is bound up with the competition for and conquest of space. Since “every center has a periphery, every symbolic centering also de-centers those persons and places that stand on or beyond a center’s periphery. Therefore, attention to geographical relations between center and periphery locates specific sacred sites or environments within a larger network of political, social, and symbolic relations of power” (Chidester and Linenthal 15). Though

practiced by a marginalized group, the Italian religious processions partook of these symbolic statements of power in relationship to space. Furthermore, they demonstrate Baumann's theory that rituals not only perform certain truths for the participants themselves but also for those *outside* the boundaries of ritual space. The hundreds of non-Italian spectators who often attended the processions of Little Italy were the recipients of subliminal messages conveyed by the privileged oppositions implicit in ritual: we and they, here and there, center and periphery, sacred and profane. Forgione's procession, though dedicated to a Calabrian saint, creates a unified Italian identity in the eyes of other ethnic communities and to the generalized American public who were implicitly excluded from its precincts. Rather than a conglomeration of Calabrians, Neapolitans, and Sicilians, the participants enact a new national consciousness of themselves before others. The Italian religious processions asserted their own politics of position, property, and exclusion, and functioned as an address to communities across a cultural cleavage, claiming place by positioning the Italian community at the center of sacred space and excluding those outside it.

Forgione's use of the ritual procession to sanctify the failures and imperfections of the Italian immigrant in a place that transcends the strictures imposed by the social order outside its boundaries enlarges the discussion of the politics of space to include the reader as well. The novel textually performs the ritual as part of a larger strategy of placement that positions the reader as either a participant or a spectator depending on his or her relationship to the immigrant group, thus implicating the reader in the contestedness of sacred space in America. This strategy is apparent in all of the novels under consideration in this chapter and was a natural outgrowth of the boundary-

producing power of ritual, one of many reasons that immigrant writers likely felt drawn to ritual as a means of asserting the right of the immigrant to a place in America.

Whereas the Italian construction of place occurred within the context of an American space characterized by overcrowding and confinement, those immigrants who sought to create a place in the territories of the West faced a different challenge—the literal experience of what Eliade describes as “the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no *orientation* can be established” (21). The Norwegians who envisioned the American prairie as *Vesterheimen*, a Norwegian home in the West, migrated from Minnesota to the Dakotas after the Homestead Act of 1862 made cheap land available (Øverland 5). They were the most rural of any of the major immigrant groups, a people from districts imbued with a deep attachment to the land and to age-old peasant traditions, for whom land symbolized status and security and for whom the values of farming as a way of life held quasi-religious significance (Lovoll 126-7). They were also a mountain people with a “peculiarly Norwegian sense of gloom,” which gave rise to a “disproportionate incidence of mental illness” on the prairie as the pointed peaks that once gave shape to the horizon gave way to the undifferentiated line of the tabletop (Skårdal 100). While the Dakotas offered seemingly unlimited resources for the taking, they could also prove to be the ruin of the Norwegian farmer, either through the relentless extremes of weather that battered the prairie or through the loneliness brought on by the isolation of sod huts remote from any form of civilization.

Norwegian immigrants faced particular challenges in meeting their spiritual needs on the prairie. In a vastly different and often *indifferent* environment, they needed the solace and sense of stability provided by the rites of their Lutheran heritage, but many

faced the immense challenge of converting the prairie into a habitable place and the homesickness incurred by leaving loved ones far behind with little support from the Church of Norway, often resorting to lay ministers and ordinary churchmen for the administration of sacraments in the extremity of conditions imposed by prairie life (75-78).<sup>27</sup> Lutheran church leaders characterized the lives of immigrants as consisting of a certain apathy and ignorance toward religious matters on one hand and a sense of urgent but unmet need for spiritual guidance on the other; yet the typical immigrant, whether pious or not, felt the need for ecclesiastical administration of rites of passage such as baptism, confirmation, weddings and funerals (81). Additionally, although the Norwegian Lutheran Church was plagued by controversy over doctrine, the role of the laity, and the adoption of high church or low church liturgical practices, the Norwegian Synod, which, according to Lovoll, became from the 1850s on “the Norwegian Church in America,” adopted the ritual of the Church of Norway because “[t]he immigrant church on the prairies and in the wooded groves in the Midwest, with its high-church ritual and its ceremony, gave the settlers a sense of solemnity and security. The accustomed and time-honored forms were a comfort and *firm point of orientation* in the new environment” (87, emphasis added).

O.E. Rølvaag’s *Giants in the Earth* (published first in Norwegian in 1924, and in Rølvaag’s English translation in 1927) locates the immigrant quest to create a sacred

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<sup>27</sup> Lovoll states, “The homeland never took the initiative to attend to the immigrants’ spiritual and physical needs. Norwegian authorities did not consider this to be their responsibility. [. . .] Because the hierarchy in the Church of Norway showed little concern for the emigrants, the university-trained pastors who wanted to work in the Norwegian colonies acted on their own. And later, when organized religious life was established, they went to the Midwest at the request and calling of Norwegian-American congregations. Motives might vary, of course, but there is no doubt that many felt a strong mission call [. . .] Still, most clergymen preferred to await an appointment in Norway rather than seek an insecure future among their compatriots in America.” *The Promise of America*. (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1999), 75-6.

place out of the geographical and cultural space of America in the Norwegian immigrant project of settlement and home building in the great Dakota Territory during the late 1800s. As Harold Simonson has noted, the novel clearly foreshadows Eliade's interpretation of the ritual founding of place as a project intimately connected with primordial cosmogony and the need for a "place (house, village, temple) that serves as a symbolic extension of the world's axis, a paradigmatic cosmos in which we are at home because we exist in a place made sacred by its connection to the axis" (15). For Rölvaag, this axis was a human construction built of Norwegian culture and religious practice.

The novel, which begins and ends with its protagonist Per Hansa Holm lost on the prairie, doggedly facing west, is filled with human confrontations with space: people lose their way in the prairie grass, animals and human beings are swallowed up in blizzards to reappear again only after the spring thaw, Native Americans are buried in "unconsecrated space," parents grieve over dead children left in unmarked graves in a grassy void, property ownership is disputed, some pioneers search desperately for landmarks, while others intentionally destroy them. More than any other immigrant author, Rölvaag makes explicit the embeddedness of the human experience of physical space in the experience of moral and psychological space in America and the importance of ritual in mediating between interior and exterior landscapes in the difficult transactions of space and place that had to be made on the prairie. More specifically, Rölvaag uses key ritual moments interspersed between episodes of human dislocation to insist upon the psychological importance of cultural traditions in the establishment of place in America and to assert an alternative ideological map of America as a sacred space. The most significant of these ritual moments, the lay baptism of Per Hansa's son Peder and the celebration of Holy

Communion in his sod hut, asserts ritual practice as a countermovement to the incessant westering toward utopian space intrinsic to the American pioneer myth.

*Giants in the Earth* is, then, a study in the human need for locative and utopian space. In order fully to explore the psychological need for both types of space, and the ways they often conflict, Rölvaag splits these two modes of being between two characters—Per Hansa and Beret Holm. Per Hansa, who enters and leaves the stage facing the sun—the utopian future—experiences American space as a wonderland of possibility that will fulfill the visions of both the Bible and Scandinavian fairy tales. For Per Hansa, America is Eden, Canaan, and the site of the legendary Norwegian castle of Soria Moria. His thirst for and delight in America as a utopian space, in which new kingdoms can be founded, is so great that he feels little need for the security of locative space.<sup>28</sup>

Though sympathetic, Per Hansa cannot understand his wife Beret, whose more sensitive, melancholy, and introverted sensibilities have been honed by pietistic religious belief and a sense of guilt at having failed in her filial responsibilities by following her husband to America. Beret's need for locative space arises out of a wilderness experience akin to that of Mary Rowlandson, in which the depravity of human nature, bereft of all possible hiding places, inevitably calls forth its counterpart from the emptiness extending

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<sup>28</sup> Eliade's analysis includes an interesting example that directly relates to Rölvaag's presentation of the character of Per Hansa as both American Adam and Scandinavian god: "What is to become 'our world' must first be created, and every creation has a paradigmatic movement—the creation of the universe by the gods. When the Scandinavian colonists took possession of Iceland (land-nama) and cleared it, they regarded the enterprise neither as an original undertaking nor as human or profane work. For them, their labor was only the repetition of a primordial act, the transformation of chaos into cosmos by the divine act of creation. When they tilled the desert soil, they were in fact repeating the act of the gods who had organized chaos by giving it structure, forms, and norms." *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 31.

on all sides. Rölvaag makes Beret's feelings explicit in a poignant scene in which, sitting alone on the hill behind her house, she takes in the monotony of the darkening landscape much as Melville's Ishmael contemplates the whiteness of the whale:

As her eyes darted nervously here and there, flitting from object to object and trying to pierce the purple dimness that was steadily closing in, a sense of desolation so profound settled upon her that she seemed unable to think at all. It would not do to gaze any longer at the terror out there, where everything was turning to grim and awful darkness . . . . She threw herself back in the grass and looked up into the heavens. But darkness and infinitude lay there, also— Suddenly, for the first time, she realized the full extent of her loneliness, the dreadful nature of the fate that had overtaken her. (39)

Beret's experience of the landscape is the sign of a deeper existential disorientation and dread, akin to Eliade's description of the experience of profane space, which, in its relativity and homogeneity, deprives human beings of any fixed point of orientation by which they can navigate their existence.<sup>29</sup> For Rölvaag, whose interest lay in presenting the cost of the American pursuit of the millennial future to those individual immigrants whose existential orientation lay in the compass points of communal bonds, traditions, and the daily consecrations of existence that lay in ritual observance, Beret's sense of dislocation is not simply the result of weakness but of a deep awareness of the spiritual value of these alternative methods of orientation that provide a connection to the past and

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<sup>29</sup> Eliade states, "The profane experience [. . .] maintains the homogeneity and hence the relativity of space. No *true* orientation is now possible, for the fixed point no longer enjoys a unique ontological status; it appears and disappears in accordance with the needs of the day. Properly speaking, there is no longer any world, there are only fragments of a shattered universe, an amorphous mass consisting of an infinite number of more or less neutral places in which man moves. *The Sacred and the Profane*, 24.

to God. As Simonson recognizes, “[Rölvaag] sought to uphold a culture that regarded institutional religion as a necessary integrating force. He knew that a people without cultural roots becomes trivial in its values, expedient in its aims, and vulgar in its tastes. Furthermore, he knew that an individual in his singularity risks psychological breakdown if he abandons a sense of tradition” (39). Rölvaag’s trilogy, of which *Giants* formed the first part, reflects these concerns, as it explores the unraveling of the fabric of Norwegian culture through the failure of its institutions and the pressures of a pluralistic society.

Beret’s apprehension of her own isolation in an existential void develops into a sense of a malign presence that has enclosed her family in a magic fairy ring, cutting them off from God’s sacred order of existence. She attempts to counteract this paradoxical confinement in an endless void by constructing her own boundaries—first, by covering up the windows of her house to blot out the eye of this entity from which she feels she cannot hide, and, eventually, by hiding in the family chest that she has brought to America from Norway. These boundaries are insufficient, however, to countervail against the evil forces that threaten to dissolve her personality. Beret becomes convinced that she will die in a savage wilderness as punishment for her sins.

The birth of Per Hansa’s youngest son Peder on Christmas Day, after a difficult labor during which the household is gripped in fear and despair, occasions the first important ritual event in the novel.<sup>30</sup> Like the immigrants of historical record, Per Hansa has no pastor to perform the Rite of Baptism. Because the child is weak and the weather

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<sup>30</sup> Rölvaag’s biographer Paul Reigstad indicates that this ritual moment was seminal to the conception of the novel. In 1923-4, while sequestered in a cabin he had built on a lake in Minnesota, Rölvaag wrote to his in-laws, asking when the first religious service was held in the area, and added this to his diary: “Have something very difficult to work out: about a birth on the Dakota prairie in the winter of 1873 and the baptism of that child at home.” *Rölvaag: His Life and Art* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1982) 102.



is severe, he goes to his best friend Hans Olsa, asking him to baptize his son immediately, a power given by the church to the laity in times of extreme need. Once the decision has been made, Rölvaag emphasizes, Per Hansa and Hans Olsa “stepped over the threshold reverently. An air of Sabbath had descended on the room” (243). Because they are ritualized men, brought up in the Lutheran traditions of Norway, they recognize the sacred space created by a table spread with a white cover, the hymn book with the page turned down, a bowl of water, and a piece of white cloth (243). These everyday material objects become transcendent symbols of continuity and certainty to the immigrants because they recognize them as the same elements used by their ancestors to inscribe Norwegian Christian culture onto the world. The white cloth in its cleanliness demarcates a symbolic square of purity, a clean and well-lit place in a house besieged by terror. As the small circle of immigrants turns its back on the void surrounding them and gathers around these familiar elements, the table containing the means to salvation forms a fixed point in the indeterminacy of the prairie, an *axis mundi*, to use Eliade’s phrase, a new center of value that can redefine the boundaries of the Sacred and Profane and counteract the malign fairy ring outside.

The narrative continues: Hans Olsa took the book and “read the ritual in a trembling voice slowly, with many pauses. And so he christened the child Peder Victorious, pronouncing the name clearly. Whereupon he said the Lord’s Prayer so beautifully that his wife Kjersti exclaimed, ‘I don’t believe there is a thing lacking to make this christening perfectly correct!’” (244). The purifying rite of baptism, done within the imaginal boundaries created by the ritual, and in strict observance of a sacred order, creates an ideal world wherein the lives of children are consecrated and held as

sacred in contrast to an indifferent space wherein nature and culture often make ideas of order and notions of individual importance meaningless. Furthermore, their adherence to the fixity of the ritual code provides a sense of certainty through obedience to established rules in continuity with historical practice. The fixity and formality of the ritual creates a frame in which the immigrants can experience the traumatic emotions associated with a difficult labor in a strange land, thus establishing intimacy with that space by feeling deeply within it. This sense of intimacy, in turn, creates a sense of place and belonging.

Rölvaag recapitulates this process on a higher level later in the novel in the Rite of Holy Communion, which takes place when an unnamed minister, who is clearly Rölvaag's image of the ideal pastor, arrives at Spring Creek and begins the establishment of a Norwegian congregation in the settlement. The minister, who has been told of the suffering of Per Hansa's family due to Beret's psychological state, realizes that their home needs to be exorcised of the negative forces that have taken possession of it. Thus he quietly tells Beret that on Sunday, he will perform the Rite of Holy Communion at her house and asks her to prepare for the event.

At the minister's suggestion, the family chest is covered with a white cloth and used as the altar. Per Hansa constructs a kneeling bench before it, and the minister places the paten and chalice between two candles on either end of the chest (401). The minister appears in full canonicals before a house packed with people. As he preaches to them on the topic of "the glory of the Lord," however, he senses that he is not inspired by the Holy Spirit to give them the comfort they need in their extremity. He gropes for analogies that will inspire and strengthen the struggling pioneers. At last he remembers the story of

an immigrant woman he saw in New York who tied her nine children to herself with a long rope in order to keep them from getting lost in the confusion of a great city. The minister compares this act on the part of an immigrant mother to the love of God that binds human beings to Himself to keep them safe. Immediately after this statement, the minister invites the crowd to participate in the ritual of Holy Communion. There, in spite of the minister's disjointed sermon, "[t]he people came forward, knelt down before Per Hansa's big chest, and received an assurance so gracious and benign that they could hardly credit its reality . . . . Many eyes filled with tears during that hour" (407).

The minister leaves with the mistaken impression that because he fumbled for words, he has never before "failed so miserably in any service!" (407); but the ritual, like Peder's baptism, has accomplished something outside the power of words: It has created utopian and locative space at once, giving orientation, order, and a sacred, protected precinct for the immigrant, while at the same time providing the fulfillment of what the ritual enacts—another world to live in, the world as it ought to be, where human beings are valued by God, where Norwegian culture is part of a sacred order, where human beings perform acts of beauty that transcend time and space and reconnect them with the world they left behind. The formality and fixity of the ritual also call up powerful feelings to be felt while at the same time setting limits on the expression of those feelings. The chest, like the table covered with the white cloth, establishes a new *axis mundi* for the immigrant out of the undifferentiated wilderness, thus asserting symbolically the value of the immigrant's past as a repository of the culture and traditions of the community that should be carried into the New World, honored as a sacred inheritance and relied upon for strength and reassurance. Rølvaag's presentation thus reflects his recognition of the

power of ritual to act as one manifestation of the rope of love and Norwegian culture that could tie the immigrants to each other, to God, and to their heritage, and thus to serve the larger purpose of rooting the immigrant in a new place.

For Beret in particular, these rituals are not only momentary stays against confusion but ministrations in a general process of healing. For, although she subsequently takes refuge in a piety that can seem insufferable to her neighbors because its inflexible adherence to religious values conflicts with the pragmatic moral compromises necessary for American pioneering, from this moment on, her ability to withstand her interior psychological pressures improves drastically. Because the security provided by a ritual reconnection to the past has been established, Beret is able to conduct the difficult business of prairie farming without any further traumatic episodes. The sense of psychological orientation that ritual brings to Beret leads her, however, to project her own need for ritual into the lives of her neighbors. When Hans Olsa lies on his deathbed after coming down with pneumonia from extreme exposure in a prairie blizzard, Beret's allegiance to religious values leads her to believe Hans Olsa must have the rituals of the church to ensure his placement in the world to come. Beret cannot rest until someone goes to bring the minister to offer Holy Communion to Hans Olsa, even though the snowstorm outside will ensure the death of anyone who dares to attempt the journey. Beret's intense need for locative space and her commitment to the time-honored traditions of her faith make her insensitive to the risks involved in satisfying her demands. She prevails, sending Per Hansa out into the blizzard from which he will emerge only with the following spring, ashen but facing the ever-beckoning, utopian West.

Per Hansa's death, while partly attributable to the actions of Beret and his own *hubris* in assuming he can survive the implacable forces of Nature, is also part of a complex of associations directed at the larger project of redefining America as a sacred space that resonates with a significant observation made by Eliade concerning the larger importance of sacrifice to the project of homefounding and its homologous relationship to temple building. Eliade explains:

If a "construction" is to endure (be it house, temple, etc.), it must be animated, that is, it must receive life and a soul. The transfer of the soul is possible only through a blood sacrifice. The history of religions, ethnology, and folklore record countless forms of building sacrifices—that is, of symbolic or blood sacrifices for the benefit of a structure. (56)

Rölvaag's use of the Eucharistic sacrifice in the sod hut sanctifies it and purifies it, ensuring its stability and continuity, and it prefigures the eventual sacrifice of Per Hansa as part of his project to found a kingdom, thus further elevating immigrant life by linking it to cosmogonic myth. But, it also enlarges the criteria by which sacred space in America should be constructed, suggesting that, in order to endure, America as Eden must be coterminous with America as Calvary. In other words, the infinite possibilities for self-realization must be tempered by self-sacrifice and a willingness to carry the cross of eternal values over and above one's own personal fulfillment. Thus, Rölvaag's use of ritual, in which the physical, psychological, and cultural landscapes are intertwined and interchanged, speaks not only to the Norwegian community with its message regarding the necessity of cultural traditions to its survival but also to outsiders. During a period in which the country envisioned itself as a model of a sacred community while also

promoting the value of individual success in a competitive marketplace, Rölvaag lifts up the immigrant hut as a temple in which the American definition of the sacred requires a dedication to the preservation of communal bonds and the well-being of all.

Those Norwegians who felt so dislocated on the American prairie have now been placed in the national memory as an integral part of that landscape. Less well-known and less easy to reconcile with concepts of the American West are other immigrant groups such as the Jews who tried to make a place for themselves in the small towns that dotted the landscape. In *God of Might*, Jewish immigrant novelist Elias Tobenkin provides a piercing study of the attempts of Russian Jews who, freed from the walls of the ghetto, attempted to construct a place for themselves in a Midwestern territory that made the imaginal walls of ritual even more essential but which provided few means by which they could engage in ritual practice.

The Jews who immigrated to America at the turn of the century were no strangers to the problem of place. Confined to the Jewish pale in Russia and to ghettos in European cities, the Jew was well-acquainted with inhabiting places that were in fact no-place. Yet, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Irving Howe notes, a messianic fervor began to take hold of European Jews when the shtetl began to crumble, urging them to break out of the walls of the pale and the ghetto in pursuit of a utopian future and a new Zion in which the Jew could live unrestricted (11). Hasidism, Zionism, Socialism, and the *am olam* movements were all manifestations of this renewed messianism.<sup>31</sup> Emigration fever was

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<sup>31</sup> Howe describes the *am olam* (Eternal People) as a movement originating in the desire to obtain release from the economic rootlessness imposed on Jews through the founding of utopian agrarian communes that combined the ideas of Owen, Fourier, and Tolstoy with those of the *kibbutz*. These communes were largely unsuccessful in America because they were poorly financed, too far from other Jewish settlements, and

another (24). Yet, when Jews reached America with visions of a Jewish Utopia, they found themselves confined in crowded, dilapidated ghettos much like they had known before and their place in America, while improved, still determined by impermeable religious and ethnic boundaries.

The question of Jewish place was particularly problematic in the 1920s, a high point of anti-Semitic activity in America, when, out of isolationist reaction to the war, “the International Jew,” who was envisioned as allied with no specific place, became symbolic of the dangers of international entanglements and was considered “the most dangerous force undermining the nation” (Higham 278). During this period, numerous events occurred that demonstrated the increasing American suspicion of Jews, whom they now associated with dangerous radicals, too acquisitive bankers, and international conspirators (280). For example, the 1920s saw the official publication of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a document created by Russian clergymen that was intended to provide proof of a Jewish plot to take over the world. In 1918, this document reached America, where the National Civic Foundation, a 100 Per Cent American organization, and the American Defense Society, a nativist protective league, promoted its distribution. A small American publishing house issued an American edition in 1920, giving a readership already primed for anti-Semitic rhetoric “objective evidence” for their paranoia (280-1). The 1920s was also the period when Henry Ford waged an anti-Semitic campaign against Jewish bankers after an economic slump left him heavily in debt. Ford painted an apocalyptic struggle between creative industry and the Jewish money kings of

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suffered the conflict between utopian principles and the need to be competitive in the marketplace. *World of Our Fathers*. (New York: NYU Press, 1976), 86.

international finance before the public that stirred nationwide attention and met with much approval, especially in the rural areas of the West and South where the campaign revived long-held hostilities against international finance (285). Finally, as noted above, the Ku Klux Klan had risen to new heights on an ideological wave which mixed the idea of the Jew with the flotsam and jetsam of urban corruption, pollution of the Sabbath, gross sensuality, and international plots to control America (286). Higham states that “[t]o the Klan the Jews stood for an international plot to control America and also for the whole spectrum of urban sin—for pollution of the Sabbath, bootlegging, gambling, and carnal indulgence” (286).

Elias Tobenkin wrote his most important novels during this troubled period. Tobenkin, who emigrated with his parents from the town of Slutsk in 1899 at the age of seventeen, settled in Madison, Wisconsin, where he obtained B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Wisconsin and subsequently embarked on a lifelong career as a journalist and foreign correspondent. In between stints in Europe and the Soviet Union, Tobenkin also managed to publish six novels, many of which embodied his socialist beliefs (Tobenkin Papers). *God of Might* (1925), published during the middle of the anti-Semitic 1920s, tells the story of Samuel Wasserman, born in the Jewish Pale of Settlement, where between Jews and Gentiles, “geographic lines were sharply drawn” (3) by means of the competing rituals that defined the boundaries of the two ethnic and religious spaces (4-5).

Samuel, the son of orthodox parents, is schooled in the Jewish law. In keeping with the sense of timelessness born of oppression that Howe describes as characteristic of the shtetl before the events of the late nineteenth century revived its sense of history (16),



Samuel's father insists that he must study the law "because a Jew must get ready for the *other world*, and one can prepare for the *world-to-come* only by reading the law and obeying its commandments, by being pious" (*God of Might* 9). Samuel reasons that the Gentile boys who taunt him and jeer at him for being a Jew and who deprive him of a place in this world will have no place in the world to come, the true home of the Jew. Thus, Samuel, like many Jews of his community, and like the Puritans whose typology was based on Jewish figures, compensates for his dispossession in this world by locating his true home in the next.

As he gets older, however, Samuel reads the letters from America sent by his secularized uncle Jacob Gold, enticing him with promises of a utopian paradise. Like many young men in his village, Samuel becomes infected with the fever of emigration. He eventually parts from his parents and makes the crossing to the West where his uncle, now a peddler, deposits him in a sprawling Midwestern town called Lincoln (modeled after Tobenkin's own town of Madison), and continues on his peddler's route. Samuel, seventeen, the only Jew in town, and thousands of miles from his family, takes a job as a store clerk, a room in a boarding house, and begins his life in America, changing his name to Waterman and doing his best to assimilate completely in order to make a place for himself.

The residents of Lincoln realize they have a Jew living among them who has different rituals and a special diet; but, because they have no experience with Jews, the nearest approximation they have to Jewish religious practice is that of Mr. Shire, the Seventh Day Adventist. They see Samuel as different but are so inexperienced in matters of religious plurality that Samuel's Jewish identity simply does not exist for them.

Although Samuel is at first relieved at being free of religious persecution, this complete elision of his religious heritage becomes in many ways more painful to him than outright prejudice.

Tobenkin raises the issue of ritual in the establishment of place early in the novel when, during a visit from Uncle Jacob, Samuel inquires nervously about how he should celebrate the approaching Passover, one of the highest and most elaborate of Jewish holy days, one that requires a ritual meal of ritually prepared food. Samuel has by now become uncertain about his religious status. Before he left Russia, his father had given him a new pair of phylacteries to use in his daily ritual observance, but they have lain untouched in his suitcase, now, in the American context, “obsolete, meaningless . . .” (59). Samuel insists he does not feel a sense of guilt, but he does experience a deep feeling of disorientation and uncertainty (58). Uncle Jacob admonishes him saying:

I’m afraid you and I will have to do without unleavened bread this Passover; we’ll have to get along with ordinary bread.... It isn’t anything to worry over.... After all, the eating of unleavened bread is only a symbol, and strong men, thinking men, can get along without symbols, if necessary.... You and I will not forget the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, their release from bondage, whether we eat unleavened bread or not. (64-5)

Jacob also insists that the prophet declares that empty rituals mean nothing to God. Instead, the heart of faith is to love one’s neighbor and to strive to do well. The rest is “chaff” (65). Here, in the words of Samuel’s Jewish uncle, which echo the prophets, Tobenkin also invokes the very Protestant notion of empty ritual, perhaps subtly referring

to the mainstream American religious milieu in which Jewish religious practice took place.

When Passover arrives, Samuel sits down at the boarding house table in a scene that reveals the intense experience of loss and anxiety that Jews often endured in giving up their ritual practice:

At six o'clock he was at Mrs. Peck's for supper as usual, as on ordinary days.

Samuel's heart was beating violently [. . .] at the table it was some time before he could swallow his first bite of bread . . . He was not afraid of God nor of punishment. Of course not. . . After all, the eating of unleavened bread on the Passover was only a symbol. His uncle had said so. He knew it himself. Only a symbol. Still he ate without looking to the right or to the left of him. He finished his meal in half the time it took ordinarily, and quietly slipped away from the table and out of the house. (69)

The foregoing scene makes it apparent that, whether or not ritual is an essential means of fulfilling the Jew's covenant with God, the symbolic life it enacts is often essential to the immigrant's sense of orientation in an unfamiliar world. Samuel attempts to follow his uncle's advice, to live without the symbols of Jewish ritual, to live Jewish holy days as ordinary days, embracing America as his new religion in order to create a place for himself in the American utopia. The result, however, is disorientation and desiccation because, ironically, Samuel gives up the very thing that can most readily give him that sense of place, not recognizing the degree to which religion, ethnicity, and place are intertwined in America.

In his search for some sort of connection, Samuel spends long hours walking along the railroad tracks, watching the trains, fascinated:

He had grown to love trains. They seemed to him a link between himself and the people he had left behind; between him and his uncle in Chicago; between him and his parents in the Old World. He loved to stand aside and wait for the onrushing engine, watch the train, panting and crashing, dash past and recede into the distance until it became a tiny speck. The people in these flying trains, what glimpses he caught of them through the windows, stirred in him sensations of vast distances and vague immensities. (51)

Although he senses his disconnection from those who ride confidently into American space and time aboard the trains, the sight eases Samuel's sense of disconnection from his past while also appealing to his drive toward the future.

Like Abraham Cahan's earlier protagonist David Levinsky, Samuel eventually achieves a good deal of commercial success, first buying his own fruit market, then developing it into the first full-scale department store in Lincoln. In Samuel's determination to become an "owner" of American space, Tobenkin depicts the sad dilemma of Jewish immigrants, particularly those in the small towns of America. Because there is no Jewish community in Lincoln, and because of the stereotype of the Jew as a person unconnected with place but identified with material gain, the only way Samuel can make a place for himself in Lincoln is to buy it— or to marry it. Significantly, Samuel marries a Gentile American woman whom he meets at a real estate office. In an important passage, Samuel watches his wife Jessie sleep, noticing her complete repose of body and spirit, which he links to her sense of being in possession of place:

It was this repose, this feeling that she had an inalienable place in the world no one could claim, no one dispute,— this feeling which had been with Jessie since her birth, which had been in the blood of her people long before she was born, and which he, Samuel, had only lately been trying to acquire—that had drawn him toward her from the moment they first met. This look of repose had held him in fascination since. . . It was fascinating him now. (202)

In an episode that exposes the conflation of Jewish ethnicity and religion in the American mind, Jessie offers to become “one of his race,” meaning one of his religion, but Samuel feels that in converting to Judaism, she would lose her own place in America and that of his children, so he insists on occupying a middle ground, going along with Jessie’s Christianity but never converting himself, thinking, as Jessie does, that it will not really matter. His determination stems partly from his Uncle Jacob’s encouragement, from the belief that “there are no yesterdays in America, only today and tomorrow. What you have been counts neither for nor against you; it is what you are, what you make of yourself [. . .] You have burst the walls of the Russian ghetto, don’t crawl into a ghetto of your own making” (110).

Yet, all the while he follows his uncle’s advice and his commercial territory expands, Samuel’s spiritual territory diminishes. Ten years pass. Samuel now sits behind the glass partition of his office feeling not like an owner but a tenant (218). The attitude of the townspeople toward Samuel changes as the tribalism of the 1920s spreads to Lincoln, and “occasionally the word money was coupled with another word—Jew” (244). His wife’s aunt now lives with the family and begins to resent Samuel because she perceives him as inept at keeping a Christian Sunday. There are times, “particularly on

the forenoons of Sundays and holidays, when he [. . .] [feels] himself like a stranger, an outsider, in his own home” (220). When Jessie invites Mr. Allen, a Methodist, to dinner one Sunday, a dilemma arises over Samuel’s saying grace because, even though ritual prayer is part of Samuel’s heritage, he does not know how to say a Christian grace at table:

A blessing before meals—of course. . . In the Old World no orthodox Jew ever went to table without a blessing—his father never did, *he* never did . . . . He knew the blessing before meals—in Hebrew, but Mr. Allen was a Christian . . . . A blessing—What was a Christian blessing like? (228).

Finally, Jessie tells Samuel to have Mr. Allen say grace, which he does, effortlessly. Samuel feels humiliated, realizing that because he has no community with which to engage in Jewish ritual practice, his family and the town of Lincoln have come to consider him a secular Jew with no religious belief at all, one whose only interest is money.

A short time later, some townspeople approach Samuel regarding a group of recently arrived Jewish immigrants who have camped out on the other side of the railroad tracks and have unwittingly bought stolen property. When Samuel goes to their encampment to try to intervene on their behalf, a complex dynamic of displacement ensues. Samuel enters the Jewish space of the encampment on the hither side of the railroad tracks, which, in relationship to the native community, is no place. Yet, to Samuel, long separated from his Jewish origins and recognizing the strangers as men from his home town, the encampment becomes a Jewish space in which he can feel temporarily at home. The immigrants, however, look back at him blindly, unable to

recognize him as a Jew. In this encounter, Tobenkin makes explicit the pathos of the Jew, whether assimilated or unassimilated. Samuel, the assimilated Jew, walks out of the camp, aware of his complete isolation, without ever acknowledging or being embraced by his own people, who, in turn, must live on the margins of society if they wish to hold on to their traditions.

Shortly thereafter, Samuel reads in the newspaper that the Day of Atonement is approaching. The next morning he wakes at daybreak in a sweat with a vivid memory of his first Yom Kippur:

As the ball of fire in the west began to descend toward the horizon, something unexpected happened. Both the service and the people had become as if galvanized. Everyone in the synagogue assumed a standing posture and with eyes lifted skyward a cry went up from a thousand throats: a cry of fervent passionate entreaty, like people pleading for their life . . . Hands were lifted, bodies trembled, faces were distorted with agony. (242)

In his recollection, Samuel asks his father what is happening. His father tells him “they were pleading for the whole of Israel. They were crying ‘The day is done, the gates of heaven are closing. Father of Mercies, hear us’” (243). Samuel now remembers this moment with a feeling of panic. He looks out at the autumn landscape with a new recognition that the West is no longer the place of inexhaustible possibility, but of sunset and the waning of possibility. He is now forty years old and living in the spiritual and social vacuum he has created by abandoning his heritage and the symbolic life: “a sensation as of *closing* would come over him, . . . Gates were closing—not of heaven, but of earth...It seemed to him that he had been cast off, the whole world had cast him

off” (243). Samuel then compares his lonely life to that of his orthodox father, at whose death the whole community had attended the traditional burial rites and the recitation of the *Hesped* (245).

When Jessie’s brother and sister-in-law move in with Samuel and Jessie, the family becomes highly active in the church. Samuel now feels more and more estranged, especially from his son, whom his relatives involve in a round of Christian activities that Samuel cannot share. During this time, Samuel meets an older Jewish salesman named Ted Stone, who, like Samuel’s Uncle Jacob the peddler, lives his life on the road. Samuel eventually confesses to Stone that he feels he has no place in Lincoln. At this, Stone wearily suggests Samuel become a Christian and join the church. Stone, who also married a Christian woman, tells Samuel his own consequences of not converting to Christianity: his children resent him, and he now stays constantly on the road because he makes his family uncomfortable when he is at home. With a face marked by sadness, Stone tells Samuel that if he could do it over again, he would have either gone where no one knew him and buried his Jewish origins as deeply as he could or else he would have come out with his race openly and aggressively, declaring “I would have made my wife and children Jews at any cost—at all cost” (252). Stone predicts that Samuel will be in the same humiliating position in fifteen years because people do not really care about religion but only about conformity: “The world will have us only on its own terms and the terms, which a dominant race, or class, or religion imposes, are always the same—surrender . . . Christian and Jew will fuse and become one only when the Jew will be willing to efface himself, to extinguish his identity—not otherwise” (255).

Samuel now begins to think about removing his family from the influence of his



zealous Christian brother-in-law and takes the train to Chicago to discuss with a Jewish acquaintance the prospects of moving there. The Jewish man, however, says the situation is no better in Chicago, and when he discovers that Samuel has a Christian wife, he becomes distant. Now Samuel realizes the horrifying extent of his displacement: “It was war and people ranged themselves on one side, on the other...One was *either* a Jew *or* a Christian . . . In-between was No-man’s Land . . . He was in No-man’s Land” (269).

Immediately thereafter, in the last scenes of the novel, Samuel flees in desperation to the Jewish quarter of Chicago, where he reads in a Yiddish newspaper of the same anti-Semitic activities that Higham documented: “Banks and other large business institutions were closing their doors against Jewish employees . . . Schools and universities were discriminating against Jewish brains . . . Jews were excluded from hotels and apartment houses . . . Protocols . . . Henry Ford . . . The Ku Klux . . .” (271).

Wandering aimlessly, Samuel finally comes upon a synagogue. Hearing the ancient prayers, “his frame, as if in response to a reminiscent summoning, swung forward to the door of the synagogue” (271). A member of the congregation leads Samuel near to the altar:

Candles were lit . . . The cantor, his face and beard half hidden in the prayer-shawl, was chanting God of might . . . “God of might.” It was so long, so long ago since Samuel had heard the prayer. The words of it had completely escaped him . . . But it did not matter . . . He found words, other words, his own words...He was swaying with the rest of the congregation . . .

“God of Might,” he mumbled, “give me might . . . Give me might . . .” (272)

Samuel’s entry into the synagogue at the sound of the ancient prayers comes

about through the deep involvement of the embodied knowing of ritual in the construction of place as he instinctively returns to the rites he had abandoned in his youth to redeem himself from No-Man's land. Again, an altar creates a new *axis mundi* around which an ideal Jewish place, both locative and utopian, can be ordered. Aligning his physical movements with those of other Jews ritually to construct the boundaries of a sacred enclosure, Samuel feels like an insider, one who at last knows his place while at the same time being released from the bonds of the prevailing outside social order into a translocal and transhistorical realm that reconnects him to the places and people he left behind. Samuel also participates in a worldwide Jewish anticipation of the final restoration of Israel to the holiest of places—Zion—thus countermining constructions of America as the Promised Land, like Mary Antin's vision. Furthermore, the fixed and formal *autopoiesis* of the Jewish ritual serves as a medium for calling up and healing Samuel's long-repressed emotions associated with the traumas of immigration in an environment strengthened by collective sympathies.

On a broader scale, Tobenkin's performance uses a highly charged ritual moment to address non-Jewish readers across a cultural divide, asserting a Jewish utopian place in high tension with a Gentile-American space he characterizes as dystopia to the Jew—indifferent, undifferentiated, and uncomprehending—leaving the reader with the sense that this moment will mark either the beginning of Samuel's complete undoing or a controversial return to his religious origins. One can almost envision the next scene, in which Samuel will open his battered suitcase and don the unused phylacteries his father gave him so long ago.

The ritual moments in the work of Forgione, Rölvaag, and Tobenkin lay bare the psychological and emotional cost involved in the immigrant quest for place in America, a

country that mythologized itself as sacred space even as it restricted that space through ethnocentrism and the politics of exclusion. Like the banner of violent hues in Forgione's saint's procession, these ritual performances courageously risk parading the sacred before an uncomprehending throng in a symbolic claim to American space that also interrupts ethno-religious monologues like that of the Columbiad to question the degree to which America, where such politics of exclusion are practiced, can be assured of its own sanctity. In the textual performance of their rituals, these writers create a counter-cartography that also invites a reformulation of the divide between the writer's ethnicity and that of the reader, whether he or she is an assimilated immigrant or a native-born American. At stake in all of this is the fundamental reformulation of the original collision between the ethnic, the moral, and the religious in the definition of America as a sacred space.

The question remains, however, whether American sacred space can ever ultimately provide a sense of place for *any* of its inhabitants, whether foreign or native born. Jacobson sums up the conundrum of the American relationship to place as follows: "Like perhaps no other nation, America's historical role has made its 'place,' in the physical as well as in the moral sense problematic: its self-described historical place as the carrier of universal values made borders and boundaries constraining, even impediments. History was accumulative; territory, again, was enclosed. This dialectic of time and space becomes an ongoing implicit theme in the American story" (52). If America's national sense of itself as place is unstable, then the ground in which its inhabitants seek to be rooted will inevitably tend to roll and shift under their feet. Add to this ambiguity the national drive toward the future, and the promise of ever being truly

grounded recedes with the horizon. *The River Between*, *Giants in the Earth*, and *God of Might* all conclude with a protagonist away from home, on the road. Whether wandering through the streets of New York, trudging across the prairie into the setting sun, or streaking across the Midwest on the American railroad, all three protagonists undergo the displacement wrought not only by immigration but also by the inherent instability of the concept of place in America.

William Boelhower maintains that the American road has conquered place and mobility has shattered stasis. “[T]he road,” he states, “is a non-place, it leaves the masses no rest. He who follows the national road cannot dwell because the road annihilates place” (74). Boelhower suggests that the “non-place” of the road is the nearest approximation to place that the American, born of a culture perpetually driven toward the millennium, in all of its varying manifestations, can ever achieve. Ironically, the Puritan quest for placement in a new land that would fulfill the eschatological promise of human history continually deferred placement for those immigrants who followed them. If Cushman’s poignant definition is right, then Americans carry a particular burden if “our dwelling is but a wandering and our abiding, but as a fleeting.” The call of the road is now central not only to the American propensity to uproot and relocate, but also to the tendency to shed jobs, identities, and marriages (Williams 22) in the determined pursuit of the ideal “house not made with hands.” Thus, as these novels reveal, the spatial strategies of ritual could provide a kind of rhythmic pause in the obsessive linearity of American trailblazing for the first generation of immigrants, enabling them to accomplish a complex transaction of space and to feel temporarily at home, but they could never establish the permanent sense of place the immigrants had known in the countries from

which they came, since to leave the boundaries erected by ritual practice meant to return to the non-place of the road. At the same time, however, these novels do point to the essential value of periodic ritual enactments of the symbolic life for providing temporary shelters along that road, oases of rest, glimpses of permanence.

### Chapter Three: Babel in Babylon: Immigrant Ritual and the Question of Language

On the last day of December, 1900, the Rev. Charles F. Parham, who is known as the first person to declare officially that glossolalia was the only true evidence of baptism by the Holy Ghost, held a prayer vigil at the Bethel Healing Home in Topeka, Kansas. Shortly after midnight on January 1st, 1901, a young woman named Agnes Ozman began speaking “in the Chinese language,” while “a halo seemed to surround her head and face” (Parham 52-3). She was thereafter unable to speak in English for three days, during which time the other Bible students commenced speaking in what Parham claimed were no less than twenty-one known languages, none of which they had ever studied. As reporters and language experts descended on Parham’s establishment, word spread across the nation of the strange events in Topeka, which are now considered to be the birth of the Pentecostal movement. A few years later, an African-American student of Parham’s named William Joseph Seymour went to Los Angeles, where he began preaching the gift of tongues at an abandoned church on Asuza Street, leading to a landmark event in the history of American religion—the three-year-long Asuza Street Revival, beginning in 1906, at which thousands of people of all races flocked to worship to Seymour’s refrain of “let the tongues come forth” (Synan 99). The *Los Angeles Times* carried the following headlines: “Weird Babel of Tongues, New Sect of Fanatics is breaking loose, Wild scene last night on Asuza Street. Gurgle of Wordless Talk by a sister” (1).

While religious devotees had been speaking in tongues in America since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, never before had the public been so interested in this phenomenon. Thanks to a considerable amount of press coverage, news of the Asuza Street revival spread

around the world. During its three-year duration, people of every race and nationality sought release in the spirit from the strictures of language into the freedom of a new, godly Babel. Many religious leaders, however, vehemently opposed the Pentecostal movement, condemning glossolalia as “Satanic gibberish” and “the climax of demon worship” (Synan 145). These reactions echo the words of Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s poem “Unguarded Gates” (1892), where very similar accents describe a different linguistic threat to America—that of the immigrant with his multiplicity of languages:

In street and alley what strange tongues are loud,  
 Accents of menace alien to our air,  
 Voices that once the Tower of Babel knew! (27-9)

During the next several years, as the Pentecostal movement spread and the Spirit erupted from the mouths of the faithful in unknown tongues that defied all linguistic norms, the literacy test became a major strategy for restricting immigration (Higham 203), the Illinois state legislature declared “American” to be the official language of Illinois (Tatalovich 65-6), and Henry Ford’s language school in Detroit required immigrant workers to attend mandatory English classes where the first phrase they were taught was “I am a good American” (Higham 248). Clearly, the perception was that the importation of alien languages, whether through Ellis Island or a rural brush arbor, threatened American political and religious unity. The language used in religious practice, a matter deeply related to the spiritual needs of dispossessed groups like Pentecostals and immigrants, could not be separated from the politics of the mainstream and the marginalized, of inclusion and exclusion in America, as immigrant writers were quick to realize. Their novels thus frequently depict controversy over the ritual use of

language as a means of examining the relationship of language to religio-ethnic integrity within immigrant life in America.

Though religious immigrants and Pentecostals differed drastically in their religious practice, both groups were generally marginalized, engaging in discourse that found no place in mainstream American use of the word in literature or the popular press. Further, both groups show a preoccupation with the religious use of a language given by God, a special kind of utterance made for the expression of matters beyond human comprehension.<sup>32</sup> In this practice they differed significantly from their mainstream Protestant counterparts. In addition, both groups saw language as a powerful means of defining one's relationship to God, which often also meant one's relationship to one's religious or ethnic group. Hence, they used language in special ways to bind and empower a cultural community they experienced as holy and whose inviolability they wished to preserve at a time when their language was perceived as problematic by mainstream Americans for whom it appeared to threaten the stability of political and religious life.

The religious practice of both immigrants and Pentecostals was enacted in the margins during a period when much of American religion was under the aegis of modernizing liberal theologians who attempted to universalize mainstream religion by means of a new rationalism which used the discourse of science to talk about God. By accommodating itself to science and the higher Biblical criticism and removing the residuum of irrational superstition, liberal theology hoped to *defend* the core truths of

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<sup>32</sup> In this observation, I draw on Jacob Neusner's discussion of the use of Hebrew and Aramaic in the Talmud, where "the very language in which a statement is made therefore forms a part of the method of thought and even the message of discourse of the document." *Talmudic Thinking: Language, Logic, Law* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1992).



religious belief from science and an encroaching materialism.<sup>33</sup> Controversy reigned among Protestants over the status of the Bible as the Word of God as some clergymen sought to hold on to notions of the Bible's inerrancy, while others felt that Biblical criticism could liberate believers from idolatry of the letter into a closer relationship with the Holy Spirit (Marty 38). Historian Martin Marty suggests, however, that this policy caused many groups to retreat into semi-permeable religious and ethno-religious cocoons by which they could regulate the degree of influence received from the outside world (94). Immigrant novelists repeatedly depict the interiors of such cocoons as well as the upheaval arising from their rupture by the forces of American culture.

In order to understand the special significance of language in ritual for immigrants, it is important to remember some of the tensions immigrants faced with regard to language in America. First of all, to enter the United States as a member of a non-English speaking ethnic group obviously meant to be deprived of language in any realm other than one's immediate environment. Thus, the immigrant had a choice—either to learn English and assimilate or to remain within the confines of his or her ethnic community. Many immigrants chose the latter option, but this often meant economic deprivation. Yet, as will be seen in the case of Jewish immigrants, even to remain within that linguistic community did not always relieve one of linguistic accommodations, since many groups who identified themselves as Jews spoke a bewildering array of languages. Thus, at the same time that American nativists worried about the linguistic contamination

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<sup>33</sup> Martin Marty provides a thoughtful and informative discussion of the modernist movement as it emerged from the seminaries of Christianity and Judaism in *Modern American Religion*, Vol 1. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 1-92.

of the English language by “accents of menace,” many immigrants also had cause to worry about the purity of their native tongues.

Those immigrants who chose the former option did so mainly as a result of economic and cultural pressures. Whoever was not a farmer and needed to rise on the economic ladder inevitably had to learn some English as a means of survival. The connection of the English language to economic success often valorized it in the eyes of immigrants, while reducing their respect for their own mode of discourse. Culturally, especially during the years during and after World War I, when anti-German sentiment intensified pro-English language and Americanist efforts, the immigrant faced assimilationist pressures from such organizations as the Committee for Immigrants in America, whose Division of Education took vigorous nationwide action to enroll immigrants in English language classes and used public schools to indoctrinate immigrants with American culture, activities which John Higham characterizes as attempts to “stampede” immigrants into adopting the English language and “into unquestioning reverence for American institutions” (247). Additionally, “hyphenated” Americans who spoke other languages were suspected of conflicting loyalties and an unwillingness to respond to America as a quasi-religious civic order that demanded the shedding of old customs and habits, language often being the most conspicuous of these old world ties.

Frequently, immigrant novels depict the shame experienced by protagonists when their inability to manipulate the English language brings on the label of greenhorn, whether from inside or outside the ethnic community. For example, in *The Rise of David Levinsky*, David’s attempts to simulate a Yankee brogue and his shame at his failure to do

so are part of his quest for economic and cultural success. Similarly, in Elias Tobenkin's novel *Witte Arrives*, Emil Witte's determination to leave his Yiddish past behind in order to become a writer whose language is indistinguishable from that of a native-born author parallels his quest for assimilation into the American scene. Thus the immigrant experience of language in America was one of an imbalance of power, in which the old language was considered to be much like the immigrant parent of the second-generation—loved, but often a stumbling block to assimilation and a source of embarrassment.

The use of language within the arena of ritual, therefore, carried important spiritual and cultural significance for many immigrants who, first of all, found comfort in a non-verbal means of expression in which the tensions between languages could be held in abeyance. This, in itself, was not only a refuge but also a means of empowerment for those immigrants who did not have an accepted mode of discourse to use in their struggle for expression in mainstream American life. As we shall see, because of ritual's primarily non-verbal strategies for the articulation of meaning, it was often the case for immigrant protagonists that, if nowhere else in American life, at least in ritual, the words, happily, often did not matter.

When the traditional languages of the old world *were* the focus of ritual practice, however, the ritual context provided an arena in which the immigrant's language obtained a beauty and performative power that it did not possess in the public arena of American life. Whether the specialized religious languages of Latin and Hebrew, or the vernacular, as in the case of Norwegian and Yiddish, the articulation of received wisdom by means of the formalized and aesthetic use of these languages maintained their status

for the immigrant in a culture in which they generally had no place. When priests and rabbis used these languages to transform the world, they maintained cultural continuity for the immigrants and empowered them through the potency of ritualized language.

Consequently, the removal of these languages from ritual practice became a source of controversy in the new world as many religious organizations felt pressure to conform to American norms by substituting English for the languages of the old world in church and synagogue. For some ethnic groups, such as the Norwegians and the Jews, who will be the focus of this chapter, this was especially controversial, since it meant the loss of cultural continuity in a sphere they turned to for comfort. For the East European Jews, this dilemma was further complicated by the pressures born of their historical experience in the Diaspora during which they accumulated a variety of vernaculars along with Hebrew, each of which fought for a place in a Jewish hierarchy of languages, cultures, and ethnically based forms of religious practice.

Finally, it is important to consider that many of these concerns were experienced as volatile, not simply for political and cultural reasons, but for specifically religious reasons. If, as Timothy Smith has argued, the immigration experience was indeed a theologizing experience, then the language in which one addressed one's God, one's highest transcendent value, mattered immensely. To speak to God in a strange tongue inevitably affected the relationship the immigrant had with the very Being that he or she turned to for guidance and who may have initiated the call to emigrate in the first place. To maintain an intimate connection to God and continue a relationship considered primary became problematic if the public ritual enactment of that relationship distanced one from the Source of life itself. In many cases, to remain loyal to God often meant a

decision to go against the official practices of the church or synagogue. To do so, however, also meant separation from a potent means of self-expression and empowerment.

Although ritual theorists over the years have continually debated the seemingly inexhaustible subject of just *what* and *how* ritual communicates, they have generally managed to agree that ritual itself is a potent, multivalent, and highly compressed form of communication. Emile Durkheim first discussed the primordial power of ritual among human beings as a symbolic means of expressing the emotions of the social unit to itself, thereby creating group consciousness and bonding (231). For Durkheim, ritual was a necessary outward form for expressing collective sentiments that could not be experienced otherwise, thus emphasizing the crucial nature of ritual expression for social solidarity and collective consciousness. Durkheim's theories are particularly relevant to understanding controversies within immigrant communities over the language used in religious rites, which were, in fact, controversies over the integrity of the immigrant community itself.

Following Durkheim, and drawing from the principles of structural anthropology and semiology, Edmund Leach suggested that ritual is a system of communication with its own rules of syntax, which human beings adopt in order to transmit collective messages to themselves (*Culture and Communication* 43). Leach divided ritual into both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication that involve two separate aspects: the technical, in which something is done, and the aesthetic, in which something is expressed (523). Both forms served important functions for immigrants by their ability to accomplish significant tasks, such as rites of passage, while also expressing ultimate

values and providing an experience of beauty in lives otherwise lacking in aesthetic pleasure, as will be discussed in Chapter Four.

More recently, Roy Rappaport has defined ritual as “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers” (24). Rappaport also divides ritualized messages into two types—this time according to the kinds of messages they communicate: 1) self-referential messages that communicate the social status of the participants, and 2) “canonical” messages that refer to the ultimate concerns of the social order itself (24-37). Rappaport locates the effectiveness of ritual communication in its tendency to collapse the distinction between the transmitter, the receiver, and the message (119). Participants recite or intone collective messages, which they, in turn, absorb while also modeling the message itself, i.e. reverence, submission, or praise. Thus, when participants use ritualized language, they act as spiritual emissaries, imparting and receiving, and, in a sense, *becoming* socially binding messages regarding what their highest obligations should be. This manner of communicating transcendent truth in many cases provided a sense of certainty and stability for immigrants embedded in a confusing array of competing demands for loyalty.

Generally, theorists who study ritual and language have fallen within two broad divisions: 1) those who study ritual as a non-verbal language in itself and 2) those who study the ritual use of language. In the first camp, several theorists have taken up the counterpoint to Kenneth Burke’s idea of language as action and concerned themselves with ritual action as non-verbal language. David Parkin, for example, focuses on the body and physical gesture as the primary means of ritual expression. While Parkin agrees that

“words may be important elements of ritual performance,” he defines ritual as a “world of non-words,” claiming that “it is precisely because ritual is fundamentally made up of physical action, with words only optional or arbitrarily replaceable that it can be regarded as having a distinctive potential for performative imagination that is not reducible to verbal assertions” (23). Parkin believes the spatial movement and gestural performance of ritual led to its evolution into drama and theater (17). Likewise, in *Ritual in Industrial Society*, Robert Bocoock recognizes ritual as a non-verbal form of communication when he defines it as “the symbolic use of bodily movement and gesture in a social situation to express and articulate meaning” (37). Theorists such as Catherine Bell and Pierre Bourdieu, who view ritual as a form of embodied knowing, emphasize ritual as a special vehicle for uniting thought and action that always works “on the hither side of discourse” by means of the formalized and symbolic movements of the body rather than through narrative statements. Both theorists thus de-emphasize the role of words in ritual practice. Indeed, Bell states that, although words are sometimes considered to be the most critical elements in ritual, “language isn’t necessary to ritual as such” (113).

The attraction of the non-verbal expressive power of ritual was readily apparent to immigrant novelists who repeatedly include scenes in which immigrant protagonists, or their family members, receive comfort and empowerment from participation in ritual despite being excluded from the religious use of the word for various reasons. For example, we will recall that although the Norwegian minister in *Giants In the Earth* failed to preach the kind of inspiring sermon he wished, the Rite of Holy Communion nourished the immigrants spiritually and increased their sense of solidarity, regardless of

the words. Similarly, Samuel Waterman, in Tobenkin's *God of Might*, has been estranged from Jewish ritual practice for over twenty years, yet when he returns to the synagogue, the ritual moment strengthens and comforts him. Tobenkin tells us:

It was so long, so long ago since Samuel had heard the prayer. The words of it had completely escaped him . . . . But it did not matter . . . . He found words, other words, his own words...He was swaying with the rest of the congregation.  
(272)

Thus, Tobenkin reminds us that, although Samuel has lost the original words to the rite through assimilation, the words of the ritual are less important than the non-verbal expression accomplished by the formalized repetition of an order of physical gestures and positions that unite him with the Jewish community and the lost world of his youth.

Louis Forgione gives us a similar incident in *The River Between*. As described in Chapter Two, Rose and Demetrio, living in exile in the neighborhood of Cherry Hill, encounter an Italian religious procession, which they follow into the neighborhood church where Mass is being said. There, "the light of the living altar glowed on their faces, and bowing instinctively to the ancient gods of their people, these two knelt in worship" (217). Forgione continues:

The two attempted a prayer, but were lost among the formal phrases, whereupon they uttered snatches of orisons and fervid words born out of the emotions that sprang within. Gradually inclining her head so that it touched his shoulder, lips quivering, eyes suffused with heavenly light, the woman murmured, "We're going to help one another—and comfort one another. . . [:] we're going to love



one another—to do good—to go straight—to live for one another's happiness.

(217)

Here again, the immigrant novelist presents two characters who have lost touch with the ritual language of their religious community. Yet the two experience a transcendent and redemptive moment through their participation in a rite where words are secondary to the experience of communal acts of worship. As in the case of Samuel Waterman, the words may be important, but the meaning of the ritual relies less on language than on the physical act of submitting the body to collective participation in a received order of movement and gesture.

Finally, Abraham Cahan reminds us that ritual could also be empowering to women who were excluded from the ritualized use of the word in patriarchal Jewish religion. In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, David recalls the actions of his mother who found her own means of circumventing the exclusion of women from access to the ritual use of language:

She was passionately devout, my mother. Being absolutely illiterate, she would murmur meaningless words, in the singsong of a prayer, pretending to herself that she was performing her devotions. This, however, she would do with absolute earnestness and fervor, often with tears of ecstasy coming to her eyes. (12)

Immigrant novelists thus present ritual as a powerful, non-verbal form of self-expression that transcends language through physical gesture in synchronic or diachronic conjunction with others that offered self-expression, spiritual sustenance, and collective empowerment to people whose relationships to other languages of power were somehow disrupted. What is equally important, however, is that these passages also depict

immigrants struggling to utter an extraordinary form of sacred language, a kind of ritualized glossolalia that transgresses semantic norms in an encounter with the holy, whereby the *ritualization* of the language, not the words themselves, expresses sacred meaning. Thus, though the immigrant might not have had command of words in American society at large, he or she did have command of the ritualized *use* of words as an expressive medium and a taxonomy of discourse. Through the physical movements and specialized language of ritual, therefore, the immigrant could address the holy and express matters that required the transcendence of quotidian speech.

This naturally leads us to the second branch of ritual studies, that which examines the role of language in ritual practice. While the body of research into the phenomenology of language in ritual is daunting, and the variety of theories concerning *what* is being said and *how* it is said is beyond the range of this chapter, a brief summary of a few important theories will provide some clues as to the reasons immigrant novelists found questions of ritual to be intimately tied up with controversies over language and assimilation.

First of all, most theorists agree that when rituals *do* use language, they employ it in a distinctive way. Ritualized language is punctuated and aligned with physical movement, usually highly formalized, often repetitive, and often rendered extraordinary by means of intoning or chanting. In addition, special languages are often used that form taxonomies of utterance within the ritual itself. For example, when Latin or Hebrew are used in ritual practice, the choice of language often cues participants as to the importance and authority of what is being said.

In ritual, “we speak a language we did not make,” wrote Durkheim, “a treasury of knowledge is transmitted to each generation that it did not gather itself” (212). Through the repeated use of formalized language that is intentionally non-spontaneous, Durkheim argued, ritual transfers an inherited body of wisdom from one generation to the next, giving the participants the sense that what is in fact a socially created reality comes from a trans-social, or supernatural, source. The ritual use of language inscribes the ritual order and group solidarity into the minds and hearts of the social body. In contrast to Pentecostal glossolalia, which signals the conferring of spiritual power upon the individual, the language of ritual confers power upon the group, providing spiritual comfort for the individual, in turn, through his or her participation in the group. For immigrants, the choice of language used to pass on the wisdom of the group, therefore, could be a volatile issue, since it was so intimately bound up with group identity and solidarity.

In a recent and interesting reformulation of Durkheim’s theories of ritual communication, Maurice Bloch argues that the formalized language of ritual—that is, speech-making, intoning, singing, and chanting—reduces semantic content by closing off possibilities of alternative utterance, thereby maximizing the persuasive factor of language for the group. According to Bloch, because of this strategic use of language, participants find it difficult to resist authoritative utterances within ritual contexts. For those who wish to resist the messages imposed by the strategies of ritual, therefore, the only alternative is repudiation of the entire ritual order, a phenomenon that indeed

occurred among immigrants when the languages used in their ritual practice began to be subject to the tensions of assimilation in America.<sup>34</sup>

Ritual also uses language in special ways to induce and transform emotion. Benjamin Ray attributes the power of ritual language to “its ability to rearrange people’s feelings and command psychological forces to make things happen in people’s lives” (110). Ritualized language accomplishes this transformation of emotion partly through the use of aesthetics to play upon the senses of participants, thereby creating an emotional climate in which they can best absorb the spoken or unspoken cognitive content of ritual. Additionally, as was discussed in Chapter Two, by its reiteration of words used in countless previous performances, ritual uses memory to recall the same words in similar or different contexts, setting up an unspoken connection or opposition to those previous contexts and the emotions associated with them. Additionally, as mentioned above, the use of languages enjoying a special sacred status, like Hebrew or Latin, often evokes emotions of awe and respect, which in turn color the perceptions of the participants as to the significance of the words themselves. These words, often read from holy books, as Durkheim recognized, carry the authority of God-given wisdom.

Finally, ritologists have often identified ritual language as playing a performative rather than a descriptive or expressive role. In *Coral Gardens and their Magic* (1935), Bronislaw Malinowski wrote, “the meaning of any significant word, sentence, or phrase is *the effective change* brought about by the utterance in the context of the situation to which it is wedded” (241). Thirty years later, drawing upon Malinowski, John Austin developed his theory of speech acts, the “illocutionary force” of which transforms the

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<sup>34</sup> See *Ritual, History, and Power: Selected Papers in Anthropology* (London: Athlone Press, 1989).

world upon which they work.<sup>35</sup> In this theory, words bring about change by pronouncement. Ritologist Ruth Finnegan has claimed that Austin's approach is especially useful for the study of ritual because it allows for a more expansive view of ritual language that does not dismiss it as magical incantation but lifts prayer and sacrifice into a special realm of speech utterances separate from everyday speech and that accomplish such important tasks as annunciation, transmission, and valediction (550). For immigrants, this aspect of the ritual use of their languages was especially significant, since words having little power in the marketplace could be used to accomplish life-altering transitions and metamorphoses, making pure what was sullied, making whole what was broken, and ushering the soul into and out of life.

As these theorists make clear, ritualized language can have extraordinary persuasive and transformative powers over the emotional and moral lives of those who make use of it. These powers are especially prominent in the novels written by immigrants, wherein protagonists must repeatedly negotiate their relationships with their religious and ethnic communities through their relationship to the language of ritual practice. While the majority of non-English speaking immigrant groups struggled to some degree with language, perhaps no immigrant groups struggled more than the Norwegians and the Jews, for whom their ritualized language delineated and protected a sacred ethno-religious order experienced as besieged by the forces of assimilation.

The Norwegian immigrant community struggled from the beginning with the role its native language should play in both church and society and made heroic efforts for many years to maintain cultural identity through separate Norwegian schools,

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<sup>35</sup> Austin's theory is best represented in *How to Do Things with Words* (NY: Oxford, 1965).

newspapers, literature, and churches. While some Norwegians supported the American common school and felt attendance there was essential for survival, the Norwegians as a whole were the only Scandinavian group to dissent from the American common school, which a number of them accused of being “godless and ineffectual” (Lovoll 98). As early as 1838, many Norwegian parents worried that the Norwegian language would die with their generation (99). With similar concerns, the Norwegian synod attempted to establish a separate network of Norwegian schools where religious instruction and the preservation of Norwegian language and culture could be combined with general education in order to maintain Norwegian-American identity (100). However, due to the disruption imposed by the Civil War and opposition from Norwegian immigrants who continued to attend the common school, this measure never replaced the American common school on a large scale.

Norwegian immigrants did, however, establish a vast array of Norwegian newspapers in the Midwest during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries not only as a means of providing information and support to isolated immigrants spanning a large geographical territory but also as a means for preserving the Norwegian language as the key to ethnic identity (105). Naturally, these newspapers depended on a Norwegian-speaking public to sustain them, and, when immigration restriction significantly reduced the numbers of native speakers in the 1920s, many of these newspapers simply could not continue. *Decorah-Posten*, the longest-running Norwegian newspaper, for example, managed to stay afloat until 1972 by absorbing subscribers from other Norwegian papers that had folded (329).

Norwegian writers also made valiant efforts to create an impressive body of Norwegian-American literature that would provide a history of Norwegian immigration and a linguistic source of ethnic pride and identity for succeeding generations. Historian Orm Øverland considers the years between 1880 and 1914 as years of optimism in the Norwegians' quest for an ethnic literature of their own because an abundance of newly arriving immigrants from Norway gave hope that the language might indeed survive for several generations into the future, and the achievement of prosperity began to allow enough leisure time for reading (109). Writers Waldemar Ager and Johannes Wist, major figures in this movement of cultural preservation, felt that the survival of Norwegian culture depended upon the survival of the Norwegian language and made this their primary concern, stressing the importance of "the cultivation of the language of the old country by loyal citizens of the new" (324).

When the United States government began limiting immigration, however, the Norwegian-speaking public needed to sustain this literature diminished to the point that publication of fiction in Norwegian became economically disadvantageous. In addition, the emergence of the 100 per cent American movement meant that hyphenated Americans who read journals and books in languages other than English raised fears of dual loyalties, leading to a further decline in interest. When Ager suggested that the Melting Pot was in fact a euphemism for a system whose aim was to "denationalize those who are not of English descent," his patriotism was questioned as a result (333). Rølvaag arrived on the American literary scene during this period. After similar attacks, Rølvaag began calling his novels "American literature written in the Norwegian language" (350), yet continued to present the immigrant's language and heritage "as one with a

conservative Lutheran view of the function of religion and the role of the church, both under pressure from the popular trends of the time” (350).

Prior to 1917, the Norwegian Church of which Rölvaag wrote was plagued by controversy over church doctrine. One of the primary issues in this struggle, as Rölvaag makes apparent in the second novel of his trilogy, entitled *Peder Victorious*, was the incorporation of the English language into the rituals of the Lutheran church. In its early years, the Norwegian Lutheran church was cohesive, with Norwegian-born pastors ministering to Norwegian-speaking congregations. With the emergence of the second generation, however, trouble arose when Norwegian-speaking parents began to struggle with the dilemma of providing cultural continuity and spiritual guidance for their American-born, English-speaking children in a society they perceived as secular. As more American-born pastors completed seminary, the church began to adopt English as the language of ritual observance.<sup>36</sup> The ensuing period was one of confusion as younger, American-born pastors attempted to use Norwegian with older members, and Norwegian-born pastors attempted to speak English with younger members.<sup>37</sup> In 1912, the president of one of the Norwegian synods recommended the appointment of English-speaking members of congregations to carry on the work of the church in an increasingly Americanized population. Shortly after this, the 100 per cent American movement during and after World War I resulted in 9,000 services being changed from Norwegian to

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<sup>36</sup> As Lovoll reports, “in the different Lutheran synods the percentage of services in English increased from none in 1900 to 22 percent in 1915. Of the young in Sunday school and confirmation classes in 1915, 27 percent received their instruction in English” (327).

<sup>37</sup> Lovoll relates an amusing story of an American pastor attempting to console a Norwegian parishioner at a funeral. The pastor tried to provide assurance of the resurrection of the flesh, which he translated with the Norwegian word “flesk.” Unfortunately, though similar in sound, the translation came out as “the resurrection of the pork” (327).



English within one year (327). Thus, even though the warring synods of Norwegian Lutheranism were finally united in 1917 as the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America, the stage was already set for the eventual loss of the original tongue. Following World War I, the number of services held in Norwegian declined in accord with the death rate (327). In 1925, there were roughly equal numbers of services in Norwegian and English, but after 1930, religious instruction was no longer given to young people in Norwegian at all. By the 1940s, less than seven percent of all services were conducted in Norwegian. Since ethnic identity was so closely tied to the mother tongue, this eventually led to gradual identification with Lutheran congregations of other ethnicities, such as Swedish and German. In 1946, the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America officially dropped “Norwegian” from its title altogether, and in 1960 united with the German and Danish Lutherans to form the *American* Lutheran Church (328).<sup>38</sup> Lovoll maintains, however, that besides the old Norwegian carvings remaining on the altars and pulpits in the Midwest, a distinctly Norwegian cast can still be detected in the American Lutheran church in “its orthodoxy and its penchant for ritual” (328).

Rölvaag’s *Peder Victorious* uses the crisis over language on the American prairie as an arena in which to explore themes of particularity and plurality, of inclusion and exclusion, of individuation and collectivity. As Peder Holm, the American-born son of Norwegian immigrant Beret Holm, struggles to separate from his family and move into independent adulthood, the territories of South Dakota and North Dakota struggle to separate from one another in favor of inclusion as states within the larger American

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<sup>38</sup> On January 1, 1988, the American Lutheran Church merged with two other Lutheran church bodies (the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches and the Lutheran Church in America) to form The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA.org).

union, and the Norwegian church on the American prairie splits over doctrine, forms of worship, and the use of English in its ritual practice. Indeed, the novel focuses on the ways in which language can form a crucial filament in the cocoons of all those communities who view themselves as holy—whether familial, cultural, ecclesiastical, or national—and who wish to protect themselves from profanation and dissolution.

Rölvaag describes the collision of languages taking place on the American prairie in terms that resemble those used to describe the Pentecostal meetings: “A confusion of tongues far worse than at the time of Babel set in; neither before nor since have such liberties been taken with English speech; and the language which the people had brought with them fared not one whit better” (116). In the midst of this multiplicity of languages, Beret and Peder Holm represent *pars pro toto* the immigrant community as either exclusionary or acculturative, and the costs involved in either stance. Beret, the first-generation Norwegian-American, is fiercely protective of her language, her culture, and her family. Indeed, her defense of the Norwegian language springs from her belief that without it, her children will lose their very humanity. Fearful of the future, isolated from mainstream society by her refusal to learn English, and certain that her children are being lured away from her by forces she cannot control, Beret fights at every turn for the preservation of her mother tongue, not only as the linguistic matrix in which she has always lived, but also as the only language in which she feels she can be a mother. As Beret listens to her children speaking English to one another, she wonders whether she actually is their mother—“their language was not hers” (196). When Miss Mahon, the Americanizing schoolmarm, criticizes Peder’s Norwegian accent and urges Beret to speak only English with Peder in order to help him master the language, Beret

indignantly rises and tells her that it is “more important that the boy should learn to understand his own mother than that he should learn to talk nice!” (138) Beret’s fear of losing her son, and of her son’s losing his cultural roots, intensifies to the point that on one occasion, when Peder struggles unsuccessfully to read a Norwegian newspaper to her at her insistence, she repeatedly boxes his ears, shouting at him, “Now you read decently!” (196-7).

For Peder of the second generation, English is the language of promise and of power. Like his father, he is fascinated by the future and dismissive of the past. The narrative tells us that Peder lives in a world that is compartmentalized into three rooms, two of which are created and separated by language—a Norwegian room which he shares with his family and their commitment to the past, and another, English room in which he can dream dreams of future conquests (3). The third room, more troubling, is that which he shares with God, a presence that has darkened since the death of his father. In this room language has ceased to function. Peder no longer prays (13).

In many respects, the religious power of the third room has been supplanted in Peder’s world by the American common school, which seeks to evangelize immigrants with the gospel of assimilation and inclusion in American civil religion. Miss Mahon uses language, and attitudes toward language, to inculcate the doctrine of Americanization in her immigrant students, preaching the sacred lore of American heroes, like Washington and Lincoln, and arranging for her students to recite their holy words in quasi-ritualized contexts at school performances for the public. The special use of language in these settings, as Durkheim and Leach suggest, makes important statements to the social body regarding itself. In particular, the *Gettysburg Address*, which Miss Mahon has Peder

recite before the immigrant community, makes subtle statements as to the necessity of subordinating particular cultural interests to the larger interests of the American sacred order in order to avoid factionalism. In a manner similar to that described by Bloch, the specialized use of language in the veneration of American civil religion makes it difficult for anyone to oppose what is said. Anyone so doing would be considered un-American.

At this meeting Peder hears a senator deliver a speech in English and is overwhelmed by the beauty and power of his oratory. The speech affects him so strongly that he vows to speak only English from then on in order one day to possess the persuasive power of language that the politician, the minister of the American civic order, displays. Peder, whose intellectual gifts make him a star at school, longs for inclusion in a bright American future the senator describes, but his language hinders him from the status he would like to achieve. In turn, Peder resents his mother for holding him to a moribund culture that deters him from full participation in this vital new society. Beret, on the other hand, is profoundly disturbed by her son's drift into the cultural homogenization brought on by the pressures of Americanization and the mixing of ethnic groups on the prairie, forces over which she feels she has little control.

Beret, in whose vision the Norwegian Lutheran community takes on the Biblical proportions of the children of Israel, contends most strenuously against the English language in matters relating to religion. Beret does not want English used in the ritual practice of her church, in Bible reading, or in prayer. For Beret, holy matters should be expressed in holy language, and that language is Norwegian. The new minister at Spring Creek, the focus of Beret's ire, wishes to modernize the Norwegian church, moving it out of its ethnic cocoon and into dialogue with the rest of America so as to minister to the

next generation of Norwegian-Americans. Reverend Gabrielson believes that “[h]ad the Norwegians, from the first, had the foresight to found a church in the language of the country the work for the Kingdom of God would have prospered far more, and all the lamentable schism could have been avoided” (271). Gabrielson sees Beret’s insular attitudes, then, as contravening the evangelical ethos of Christianity itself. In addition, Gabrielson, who is a practical man, tells the horrified Beret that in twenty years no Norwegian will be spoken in America, and the church must prepare itself for that inevitability (220). Gabrielson thus begins implementing the use of English into the ritual observance of the Norwegian Lutherans in Spring Creek.

The struggle between Beret and Gabrielson over language, on the other hand, is ultimately a struggle for the soul of Peder. Above all, Beret does not want Peder talking to God in a language she cannot understand (34). Gabrielson, however, wishes to groom Peder for the ministry and encourages him to approach the practice of his faith in English. His methods only increase Peder’s confusion over language, religion, and assimilation:

If God lived here, He must be an American. There you have it! . . . What would they want of a Norwegian God in this country? Most likely that’s just what these Norwegians didn’t understand and so things went wrong with them [. . .] But just suppose now God didn’t like their talking to Him in Norwegian? . . . When He was an American? [. . .] [H]e couldn’t get rid of the thought that it wasn’t proper for an American to talk Norwegian to God. (17-18)

Gabrielson gives Peder an English Bible, the first he has ever seen, and, like Miss Mahon, has Peder read its holy words publicly before his mother, whose reaction is as would be expected: “she wanted to get up and protest—[Peder] was not going to read the

Word of God to her in English!” (224) The conflict intensifies at Beret’s barn-raising when all sit down to eat and Reverend Gabrielson offers “a lengthy blessing in English” (242). Beret takes offense at Gabrielson’s choice of English for the ritual blessing of the food, but Gabrielson quietly suggests that Beret is applying exclusionary religious ethics to the issue of language, explaining that God does not intend for us to keep spiritual gifts to ourselves but to interact with other communities. Beret rejoins, “But supposing that what is precious to me is worthless to others? . . . It might also be that I cannot make any use of what I am getting in return.” The narrative tells us that Beret looked to the others “like one who has lost her way and doesn’t know whither to turn” (243).

Beret’s dismay partially stems from her innate capacity to understand what Rappaport has explicitly described: the power of ritualized language to make self-referential statements about the participants and to impart canonical messages about their ultimate concerns. Beret recognizes Gabrielson’s choice of English to bless the food she has prepared for her Norwegian friends as a declaration that the old social order she has loved, and which she needs for her own psychological stability, is no longer valid and that Norwegians are now a people who accept cultural annihilation in the name of Christ for the sake of Americanization, a reversal of values she finds repugnant. This interpretation is born out in a private discussion the two have later, when Gabrielson tells Beret she is no longer a Norwegian but an American. Beret insists she is a human being first and that language is essential to maintaining one’s humanity (224). When Gabrielson argues that one does not cease to be a human being just because one changes languages, Beret resorts to Biblical analogies, comparing the Norwegians to the lost tribes of Israel. Gabrielson claims the tribes were lost on account of their sins, but Beret immediately

retorts, “That they had so little regard for their language must have been part of their sin” (225).

Finally, at the Rite of Confirmation, the swirl of confusion regarding language, religion, and belonging comes to a head for Peder, who, under pressure to assimilate into the American civic order, which also presents itself as sacred, has gradually lost his faith in God and his own cultural inheritance. When Reverend Gabrielson, who has confirmed several other young Lutherans in English, asks him the three questions prescribed by the Rite of Confirmation, Peder, who is believed by all to be called by God to the ministry, cannot find any words to answer him. He is completely silent. Beret sits stunned at her son’s failure to respond, and the narrative tells us that Peder, “getting up from his knees before the altar, was staggering and had to grab hold of the rail to steady himself. His features, drawn and haggard, looked like those of one in terrible pain. The instant he reached his seat he collapsed in a faint” (261). Peder, who recognizes the transformative power of words uttered in a ritual context, is unsure of his willingness to commit to this community and its God, but, as Bloch suggests, he cannot engage in dispute because of the power of the formalized language of ritual to repress alternative discourse. Peder’s physical symptoms indicate a somatic rebellion against the ritual order, which is born out by his later complete abandonment of the religion of his youth.

Later, when Gabrielson, in English, tries to make the recalcitrant Peder commit to attending seminary, Peder refuses, reinforcing his disavowal by repeatedly answering Gabrielson’s English entreaties in a sullen Norwegian. Yet, while his retreat to his mother tongue signals his separation from Gabrielson, it does not signify his allegiance to his mother. By the novel’s end, Peder has separated from Beret and his Norwegian heritage

in favor of inclusion in the new, English-speaking pluralism of America by marrying the English-speaking Susie Doheny, the sister of his Irish-Catholic friend Charley, a union his mother stoically accepts as a personal and cultural tragedy.

*Peder Victorious* reveals the degree to which language, particularly the ritual use of language, is implicated in the creation and destruction of sacred communities. The novel's conflicts bring to mind Durkheim's claim that ritual practice is not so much about the worship of deity as the worship of the social order, a thesis that is especially apparent in Beret's conflation of the Norwegian and Biblical communities and Miss Mahon's devotion to the American civic order as a religious vocation. Both women view language as crucial to the definition of sacred boundaries. Beret desires to receive holy wisdom by means of a language that, because it has been passed down to her from her ancestors, is capable of conveying the transpersonal truths she needs to hear. For Beret, to speak to God, and of God, in a language of the American civic order is to take upon oneself the yoke of a secular society bent on destroying those truths. Beret's concerns, which reflect in an extreme form those of Rølvaag himself, are born out in her son's experience, as Peder's estrangement from his mother tongue coincides with his alienation from the God with whom he was so intimate as a boy.<sup>39</sup> In *Peder Victorious*, Rølvaag insists upon allegiance to one's linguistic heritage as not only essential to the maintenance of cultural integrity but of spiritual integrity as well.

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<sup>39</sup>Paul Reigstad, Rølvaag's biographer, records a speech that Rølvaag made on May 17, 1907, Norwegian Independence Day, to a Norwegian-American audience on the losses entailed when Norwegians give up their culture in favor of assimilation. One of the most important of these losses, according to Rølvaag, is "the intimate spiritual communion between the individual and his people" that comes from a common language, customs, and traditions. Rølvaag also urged Norwegians to preserve their language but not to live in isolation from Americans. *Rølvaag: His Life and Art* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1982) 35.



Similar concerns over the moral use of language appear in the novels of Jewish immigrant writers who were members of an ethnic group that had perhaps the most complex dynamic at work in relationship to language. Jewish immigrants often participated in a multi-lingual community that spoke a host of vernaculars, while venerating Hebrew as a sacred language and pursuing English as the key to prosperity. Yet, as Jewish immigrant writers make plain, the Jews who were heirs to a rich and ancient linguistic tradition were also carriers of a bitter legacy of Gentile myth and fears regarding Jewish language itself, myths that centered upon the language of the Jewish Talmud and the vernacular of Yiddish as signs of Jewish corruption and barbarism. Many Jews had internalized these old-world attitudes toward Jewish language and subsequently carried them into the American milieu, where they rumbled and sometimes erupted into their explorations of the relationships between language, assimilation, and religious integrity in America. Often, therefore, the writer's depiction of Jewish language and ritual reflects the degree to which he aligned himself with those attitudes.

Christian prejudice against Jewish language as the sign of Jewish blindness has a history dating back to St. Paul himself, who portrayed the letter of the Jewish law as a visual impairment that could be removed only by the revelation of Christ. Yet, St. Paul's account of his experience on the road to Damascus belies a Judaic tradition built upon a devotion to the power and moral integrity of the word. The first act of God in the Hebrew Bible is an act of speech: "And God *said*, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3). For the Hebrew God, Word and Act are one and spring forth in perfection from God's perfect nature. Thus, for the Jew, all language is fundamentally derived from the goodness and power of God's primordial speech act at the moment of creation, and the proper work of human

beings is to answer and emulate the all-powerful, all-perfect word of God.<sup>40</sup> In the Jewish tradition, therefore, to fully exist, one must speak *to* God and *of* God, and, although God cannot be directly named, “God is someone to whom Jews must keep talking, and as for whether He ‘exists’ or not, that is a problem for philosophers” (Howe 191).

Just as language itself was of the highest theological importance to the Jew, the Hebrew language in particular held a revered place for its unique capacity to express fundamental truths about the universe. In his discussion of the outpourings of devotion to the Hebrew language by the Kabbalists of the Middle Ages, Jewish scholar Gershom Scholem sums up the special power of the Hebrew language for the Jew and its theological basis: “To them, Hebrew, the holy tongue, is not simply a means of expressing certain thoughts, [. . .] language in its purest form, that is, Hebrew [. . .] reflects the fundamental spiritual nature of the world; in other words, it has a mystical value. Speech reaches God because it comes from God” (17). Thus, for the Jew, “the very

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<sup>40</sup> In Psalm 33, for example, human beings are first called to sing to God because God’s word is completely good and completely efficacious:

Praise the Lord with the lyre,  
make melody to him with the  
harp of ten strings!  
Sing to him a new song,  
play skillfully on the strings with  
loud shouts.  
For the word of the Lord is upright;  
and all his work is done in  
faithfulness.  
He loves righteousness and justice;  
the earth is full of the steadfast  
love of the Lord.

By the word of the Lord the  
heavens were made,  
and all their host by the breath of his mouth. [. . .]  
For he spoke, and it came to be;  
he commanded, and it stood forth. (Psalm 33: 2-9)

nature of humanity is defined by language. Language is the true link with God”

(Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred* 277). Centuries later, Jewish immigrant writers demonstrate the essentially unchanged status of Hebrew in the eyes of Jews in their fervent recollections of its spiritual power. Abraham Cahan, for example, remembers well his father, who “loved the Hebrew language and often read it aloud. The beauty of the language would make his eyes sparkle with excitement” (*The Education of Abraham Cahan* 34). And Mary Antin, whose father gave her the opportunity to study Hebrew just like her brother, recalls her childhood joy in reciting Hebrew texts: “What I thought I do not remember. I only know that I loved the sound of the words, the full, dense, solid sound of them, to the meditative chant of Reb’ Lebe” (90).

However, Jewish veneration of Hebrew was historically misconstrued by Christians as a sign of legalism, materialism, and occultism, as well as of the Jewish inability to recognize Christ as the true *Logos*. In *Jewish Self-Hatred*, Sander Gilman provides a comprehensive discussion of the ways in which, beginning in the Middle Ages, Jewish self-perception has continually been tied to Gentile assumptions about Jewish language, particularly that of the Talmud, or “oral Torah,” a commentary on Jewish law and ritual compiled after the fall of the Temple and completed by approximately 600 A.D. (23). Many non-Jewish Europeans viewed the Talmud as the primary receptacle of Hebrew, a special, hidden, demonic language, by which the Jews secretly devoted themselves to occult rituals and the thwarting of Christian truth, as is apparent in Christian dramas of the time, which depict Jews conjuring evil spirits with Hebrew incantations (24), and in the actions of the Church, which, under Pope Gregory IX in 1244, seized the ‘heretical’ Talmud, and after a public debate, had it burned in

Rome and Paris (33). These Gentile beliefs were further shaped by Jews, often converts to Christianity, who felt compelled to adopt the very attitudes that characterized their language as indicative of a morally corrupt nature and an inability to reason effectively. Additionally, since the Book of Revelation paints a vision of Jewish conversion as crucial to the Second Coming of Christ, Christians viewed the Talmud as threatening God's plan of universal salvation because it impaired the Jewish ability to accept Christ as the Messiah (33).

In the centuries following the Middle Ages, "[t]he association of the false perspective of the Jews with the Talmud became universal," Gilman explains, and the Talmud came to represent "those magic, evil books in which the blindness of the Jew is contained" (33). Thus, the Hebrew language continued to be linked in the European mind with black magic and secret ritual. In his autobiography (1558-62), Benvenuto Cellini, for example, cites his recollection of a Jewish magician engaged in secret rites in the Colosseum who called upon the devil "in phrases of the Hebrew" (24). Gilman suggests that in this period Jews began to be characterized as either "good" or "bad," depending on their distance or proximity to the language of the Talmud, its magical practices, and the moral blindness it inculcated.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> One of the most famous early debates over Jewish language took place during the Renaissance, when the Talmud became notorious in the Reuchlin controversy, when Johannes Reuchlin defended it to the Church against the accusations of the newly converted Jew Johannes Pfefferkorn, who fulminated against its language as evidence of the inherent blindness and corruption of the Jews and advocated depriving them of their Talmud altogether. Although Reuchlin, like many intellectuals of his time, saw the Talmud, like the Kabbala, as a window into a world of exotic wisdom that could be opened up by Gentile intellectuals, he tolerated its creators as protectors of the Word only, denying to Jews any capacity to interpret it because of their inherent blindness to the truth (44). Only Christians, through the revelation of the Word made Flesh, had the insight to perceive the truth veiled by Hebrew language and ritual. Reuchlin confronted church officials, saying that, unlike many other Jewish writings that openly denied Christ, the Talmud and the Kabbala did not; therefore, he wished to rescue these documents from the Jews for Christian exegesis. A number of humanist intellectuals came to Reuchlin's defense, publishing *Letters of Obscure Men*, a

More significantly, Martin Luther's pamphlet *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543) openly declares that Jewish language is a code used by a society of thieves to hoodwink Gentiles, a legalistic tool similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church (but made even more duplicitous by Talmudic argument), and thus a danger to the social order. Luther recommends confiscating the Talmud and burning synagogues as a remedy for Jewish mendacity (60).<sup>42</sup> His other pamphlets also include some of the first published references to Yiddish, a secular language that had existed among the Jews over a wide geographical area for hundreds of years prior to the Reformation. Yiddish used Hebrew characters, thus contributing to the perceptions of non-Jews that it was a mysterious and secret language deliberately obscured in order to hide Jewish machinations and diabolical practices from innocent Christians.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, Gentile paranoia regarding Hebrew as the secret language of the Talmud gradually came to extend to the vernacular use of Yiddish, and its connection to the negative stereotype of the Jew from the East began to take hold (76).<sup>44</sup>

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scathingly satirical document written in the personae of ignorant supporters of the Cologne Dominicans. Sadly, their defense did not extend to the Jews, since they included a great number of anti-Semitic jibes at the converted Jew Pfefferkorn, portraying him as a Judas who, with his promiscuous Jewish wife, had skulked into Christendom from the East. Gilman cites this document as the beginnings of the stereotype of the "Eastern Jew" (*Jewish Self-Hatred* 48-9).

<sup>42</sup> Luther links Jewish ritual to the evils of the Catholic Mass as the sign of a people who believe salvation can be achieved by words rather than faith, and he urges Protestants to cleanse the Hebrew language "from the piss of Judas" (qtd. in *Jewish Self-Hatred* 64). Luther's belief that Jews were congenitally incapable of being converted directly anticipates the arguments of American nativists four hundred years later that claimed Jews were incapable of being assimilated.

<sup>43</sup> Gilman acknowledges that there were, in fact, some Jewish thieves and that Yiddish and Hebrew characters were used by thieves as a secret code. What he finds problematic in Luther's statements is his conflation of the language of thieves with the character of the Jewish people. (69).

<sup>44</sup> In his treatise on the German language, for example, Johan Christoph Adelung identified Yiddish as a specifically Jewish language tied to the East, a historically threatening place for the Germans because of repeated attacks by Turks and Huns. (70).

By the time of the emancipation of the Jews in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Yiddish had come to be explicitly identified in the public mind as a Jewish tool of corruption, thievery, and deceit. Along with increased proximity of Gentiles to Jews, emancipation brought about increased anxiety. Jews now found themselves in a double bind, especially with regard to their language (83). On the one hand, according to such documents of emancipation as Austrian Emperor Joseph II's Edict of Toleration (1781), Jews were required to give up their use of Hebrew and Yiddish in public discourse so as to protect Gentiles from Jewish exploitation in commerce and to send their children to German-speaking schools. On the other hand, as Jews came to resemble Gentiles in language and education, Gentile anxiety over Jewish assimilation led to an increased need to identify the Jew who, with his propensity to lie and deceive, might be masquerading as a Gentile. Such anxieties led to the required use of Hebrew words in oaths taken by Jews in the courts and to the use of exaggerated Jewish language in the theater to single out Jews as either villains or buffoons (76).

In what have been described as the first positive portrayals of Jews in German, however, Enlightenment dramatist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *The Jews* (1749) and *Nathan the Wise* (1779) portray Jewish protagonists who speak perfect German, the language of reason and objectivity, thus attempting to promote the image of the "good Jew," one who maintains his distance from the argumentative discourse of the Talmudic *pilpul* and the passionate, "barbaric" language of Yiddish. Lessing's characters are therefore indistinguishable as Jews because the hallmark of their Jewish identity in the public mind, their special language, has been stripped away in order to make them appear

virtuous. Thus, perhaps Lessing unwittingly continues the propensity of Europeans to use Jewish language as the measuring stick for Jewish character (82).

A year before he wrote *The Jews*, Lessing had met Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, upon whom he clearly modeled his noble Jewish characters. Mendelssohn, the only Jew at the court of Berlin, held favor there precisely because he was unrecognizable as a Jew, having rejected the language and methods of reasoning of his heritage in favor of German language and logic. Mendelssohn later became the central model for the Jewish *Haskalah*, or Enlightenment movement, and the forerunner of the Reform movement in Judaism. At a particularly precarious moment when Mendelssohn was called upon by a Christian pastor either to refute the claims of Christianity publicly or to convert to Christianity himself, Mendelssohn opted to reject public disputation and religious polemic, the characteristic mode of Jewish Talmudic argumentation and rabbinic discourse, in order to present himself as the non-disputatious, rational, and objective Jew, who stands, rather, as a neutral observer. Gilman cites this moment in which Mendelssohn, in self-defense, split the self-image of the Jew into “good” and “bad” along the lines of language and reason used by anti-Semites as decisive for Judaism. From this moment on, Mendelssohn, the “good Jew,” provided the major model for Jews who sought a way out of marginalization, one which meant a radical shift in their linguistic identity from Yiddish to German and Hebrew, and the relegation of their socially unacceptable discourse and mode of argumentation to the stereotype of the “bad Jew,” who, in turn, became increasingly associated with the culturally degraded, irrational, ritual-bound, Yiddish-speaking *Ostjude*, the Jew of the East, whose diseased mishmash of language, like his superstitious ritual, divided him from mainstream society

and infected his ability to participate in the civilized social order (98). Gilman maintains that Mendelssohn's adherence to the image of the rational, German-speaking Jew was, thus, "the fulfillment of the cultural demands of Christian, capitalistic society" (104).

Consequently, by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jews increasingly sought to abandon their connections to a language they perceived as detrimental to their advancement as a cultural group. As soon as Jews began to speak German on a regular basis, however, an interesting phenomenon occurred. Non-Jewish Germans invented a mock language, called "*mauscheln*," or "*jüdeln*," to portray the way Jews spoke German with a Yiddish accent. *Mauscheln*, "the use of altered syntax and bits of Hebrew vocabulary and a specific pattern of gestures to represent the spoken language of the Jews," became symbolic of the Jews as "liars, falsifiers, and merchants" (139). At a time when Germany was striving for unity through an adherence to a purified form of the German language, Jewish *mauscheln* became the ideal linguistic foil against which German political, ethnic, and linguistic integrity could be defined. The resulting dilemma was that "*mauscheln* was a quality of language and discourse that Jews perceived as a major problem in their true and total acceptance within the German community" (141). As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, *mauscheln* also became tied to biological theories of race that identified Jewish speech as caused by physical defects born of thousands of years of inbreeding (213-15). As a result, German Jews increasingly felt compelled to reject Yiddish as a form of *mauscheln*, a corrupt language of the East, which signified biological inferiority and "a despised, incomplete symbiosis with the dominant culture" (258), in order to achieve inclusion in Western European society, but this also meant



rejecting their native language which tied them together ethnically as Jews in the West (107).

The German-speaking Jews who immigrated to America in the 1820s carried these attitudes toward their language to the new world. Heirs of the legacy of Moses Mendelssohn, they possessed the same desire for assimilation and the same views of Orthodox Jewish ritual, the Talmud, and the Yiddish language as major stumbling blocks to Jewish progress in Western society. Before they arrived in America, they had already begun to alter Jewish dietary laws and the rituals of the synagogue in an attempt to bring Jewish religious practice out of the Middle Ages and into accord with modern German society. This desire for modernization and reform of religious practice led to the transformation of American Judaism. Beginning in the 1840s, German Jews formed small groups called "Reform Vereine" and invited distinguished German rabbis to their houses of worship where they began experimenting with changes in the liturgy. Reformers, such as Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, who operated from an assimilationist platform, transformed Jewish worship from spontaneous congregational outpourings to orderly sequences led by rabbis that were in many ways indistinguishable from Protestant and Unitarian services, finding Biblical support for their actions in the words of those prophets who had emphasized social justice and ethical behavior and had attacked priestly rites as superficial forms of worship. Organs and choirs were instituted along with pews and family seating. Many temples even moved their Sabbath worship to Sundays and eliminated prayer shawls, the ritual of *bar mitzvah*, the *huppah*, the dietary laws, the eating of unleavened bread during Passover, and "most everything considered sacred by traditional Jews," including chanting the Torah and the Talmud (Raphael 65). Perhaps

most significantly, Wise and his followers reduced the use of Hebrew to a minimum, replacing it with English as the language of religious practice.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, by 1881, Reform Judaism had come to be *American* Judaism. Fewer than fifteen of 200 major congregations in the U.S. were still Orthodox (Glazer 38). German Jews had assimilated quickly into the American milieu and achieved a large degree of prosperity, living lives relatively free of anti-Semitism in a democracy they found congenial since it was based on the familiar values of the Enlightenment and the Old Testament. Into this placid environment now came what many German Jews experienced as a plague of *Ostjuden*, whose presence threatened to undermine all that German Jewish immigrants had worked so hard to achieve.

These Eastern Jews, in turn, had already witnessed the beginnings of a reversal of the attitudes held by their German co-religionists toward their people and their language. In late 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, a reaction against Western European rationality and anti-Semitic race theories had set in. Jews began reformulating images of the “good Jew” and the “bad Jew” and along with them, standards of Jewish language. Writer, philosopher, and theologian Martin Buber, for example, identified the once-reviled Eastern Jew with the mystical piety of Chasidism, a religious practice that he presented as older and more

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<sup>45</sup> Isaac Mayer Wise (1819-1900) was a Bohemian rabbi who, after immigrating to America in 1846, formulated the basic theology and practice of Reform Judaism in America. Wise quickly became a progressive modernizer, a “free religionist,” who stressed the unchanging truths at the heart of all religions over their “transient” historical forms and sought to universalize the Jewish faith. Wise was an ardent American who believed that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were the fulfillment of God’s revelation to Moses on Sinai and that Americans and the people of Israel shared one “national Deity” (Raphael 151). He threw himself into the study of English and was one of the few rabbis in the U.S. to have mastered the language in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Glazer 37). Fierce battles were fought over the changes in liturgical practice, but eventually all Reform congregations adopted the *Union Prayer Book* published in 1894, which was based on Wise’s *Minhag America* (American Ritual, 1857), and services were now conducted almost entirely in English.<sup>45</sup>

authentic than the rationalistic Judaism of central Europe in collections of stories like *Tales of Rabbi Nachman*. In a subversive move, Buber defiantly created a new form of *mauscheln*, now to be the property of the Jew and a sign, not of his barbarism or his deceit, but of his piety.<sup>46</sup> In so doing, Buber attempted to reclaim Yiddish as a language belonging to the Jews, yet his tools, according to Gilman, were those of the anti-Semite (279).

Theodore Herzl, the leader of the Zionist movement, also used the linguistic concept of *mauscheln*, this time transforming it into an anti-Zionist character type, called *Mauschel*, whose weak and corrupt nature disables him from taking courageous action to restore the people of Israel to their homeland. *Mauschel*, published in 1897, includes the following portrait of the Zionist's sinister *doppelgänger*:

As a type, my dear friends, Mauschel has always been the dreadful companion of the Jews, and so inseparable from him that they were always confused. The Jew is a man like all others, no better, no worse [. . .] but Mauschel is a distortion of the human character, unspeakably mean and repellant [. . .] The Jew aspires to higher levels of culture; Mauschel pursues only his own dirty business [. . .] Even the arts and sciences he pursues only for mean profit [. . .] It is as if in a dark moment of our history some mean strain intruded into and was mixed with our unfortunate nation [. . .] In times of anti-Semitism Mauschel shrugs his shoulders. Honor? Who needs it if business is good? (qtd. in Elon 251-252)

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<sup>46</sup> Buber's *Tales of Rabbi Nachman* and *Legends of the Baal Shem Tov* present the world of Eastern European Chasidism as more ancient than the rationalist Judaism of Moses Mendelssohn, even though the Bal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism, was his contemporary. Buber used his new form of *mauscheln* in his German translation of the play *Eisik Scheftel (Jewish Self-Hatred 275)*.

In order to promote the cause of Zionism, then, Herzl turned to the same anti-Semitic stereotypes of the avaricious, opportunistic, gesticulating Jew that were partly responsible for the urgent need of Jews for a homeland in the first place (*Jewish Self-Hatred* 243).<sup>47</sup>

Thus, German and Russian Jewish immigrants to America were historically divided not only by the language they spoke but also by their attitudes toward Jewish discourse itself and its proper relationship to Jewish piety. Further, since German Jews had become estranged from their transnational binding agent, Yiddish, they had difficulty in understanding their co-religionists, both linguistically and philosophically. An example of such misunderstanding occurs in Cahan's recollection of being interviewed by an American Jew upon his arrival in the United States:

The main office of the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society was on State Street, directly opposite Castle Garden. When I arrived there I was interviewed by an American Jew who conversed with me in German, which neither of us spoke well. Unable to communicate effectively, we were uneasy with each other. I departed with a strong impression that he was a heartless bourgeois. And he probably suspected that I was a wild Russian. That is what they called us immigrants at that time, sometimes even to our faces. This inability to understand each other affected the relationship between the Russian-Jewish immigrants and the American *Yahudim*

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<sup>47</sup> Similar concerns can be seen in the work of Franz Kafka. Kafka, whose relationship with the world of the Eastern Jews was highly ambivalent, became interested in his Jewish identity largely through having heard Buber speak on Jewish mysticism in Prague in 1913 and submitted and published stories in Buber's literary journal *The Jew* (282). One such tale—"A Report to the Academy"—concerns an ape taken from the jungle that acquires language in order to earn the right to be released from his cage. Yet, even though he acquires language and writes his story in perfect academic German, the ape can never transcend his image as an ape in the eyes of society. Gilman detects a strong parallel in Kafka's story between the ape's dilemma and that of European Jews, who, in attempting to write in the language of the dominant culture, worried that there was something "Jewish" in their discourse, a hidden mode of expression that produced "a specifically Jewish tone, a *Mauscheln*" (283).

or German Jews who had crossed over years earlier. (*The Education of Abraham Cahan* 218)

In the religious sphere, a storm of controversy broke out as the newly arrived Orthodox immigrants clashed with German Reformed Jews in America who looked down on their religious practice and the language in which it was sometimes conducted.<sup>48</sup> The synagogues of the new immigrants had practiced Orthodox ritual in Hebrew, with occasional sermons in Yiddish. They now hardly recognized what they perceived as a bland and unemotional version of Christianized worship. Additionally, for many Eastern Jews who were still connected to the ancient mystical sense of the Hebrew language as the language of the living God, the glory of Hebrew was considered compensation for the long and painful wait of the Jews for the Messiah (Howe 12). To implement English in ritual practice was to launch an assault on the fundamental relationship between the Jews and their God. Jacob David Willowski, the Rav of Slutsk, for example, declared that English had no place in the ritual observance of Jews and that English sermons were so dangerous that “there [would be] no hope for the continuance of the Jewish religion” if they were allowed to continue (Sorin 181). To do away with Hebrew and submit to the yoke of English was simply a linguistic form of Babylonian captivity in many Orthodox eyes.

In addition, many Jews from the Pale also insisted on using Yiddish, the bane of German Jews, in their services. Much to the chagrin of the modernizing and

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<sup>48</sup> This prejudice against Yiddish as ill befitting religious observance also apparently existed among educated Russian Jews. Cahan relates an incident that occurred when he was a boy. One summer he was taken to the synagogue with the student body of his school to pray because “prayers of children are looked upon with favor by the Almighty” (26). When they began to leave, however, several students started to sing in Yiddish, “God, God, send down raindrops for the little children!” “We were stopped at once,” Cahan remembers; “A prayer in Yiddish was a mock prayer” (27).

universalizing German Jews, therefore, most Eastern Jews shunned Reform temples, creating honeycombs of small synagogues in Jewish quarters, organized by members of the same village, where they used not only Yiddish but the same *accents* of Yiddish spoken at home in their ritual observance, evidence that “it was the word that counted most. Yiddish culture was a culture of speech, and its God a God who spoke” (Howe 11).<sup>49</sup>

Even as Orthodox Jews struggled over the proper use of Yiddish in the synagogue, members of the secular Jewish community attempted to raise the status of Yiddish in the eyes of their fellow Jews. For example, although many Russian Jewish socialists and intellectuals, like their German counterparts, looked down on Yiddish as the language of a backward thinking people, Abraham Cahan insisted that Yiddish could be used as warp to hold the weft of Jewish culture and politics together, becoming the first American Socialist to address rallies of Jewish workers in Yiddish<sup>50</sup> and devoting

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<sup>49</sup> Over time, however, religious officials of even these congregations felt the need to incorporate American language in order to gain the respect of the congregation. Cahan tells the sad story of Rabbi Jacob Joseph who was called from Vilna, Cahan’s home town, to become Chief Rabbi of the East side. Cahan, an atheist, nevertheless went to hear him preach:

It was only his second or third sermon since his arrival and already he was making a clumsy attempt to accommodate himself to his audience by using American Yiddish. Once he used the word “clean” for “rein,” and it was easy to see this was purposely done to show he was not a greenhorn. His efforts to acquire social polish failed. [. . .] His American words sounded unnatural. It was a pity.

I surveyed the congregation. Almost all around were men dressed in fine American style: pressed suits, starched collars, neckties and cuffs, clean-shaven and spruced up. The rough edges of a small East European congregation had been replaced with American polish and sophistication. They looked upon their Chief Rabbi and decided he was a greenhorn.

Reb Yankev Yoisef was like a plant torn out of the soil and transplanted into a hothouse. His health deteriorated. He suffered a paralytic stroke. (396)

<sup>50</sup> Cahan writes in his autobiography of his defense of Yiddish as a powerful literary and political language to intellectual friends who dismissed it: “Yiddish, they thought, was suitable for daily talk at home, in the *cheder*, or while bargaining with a Jewish merchant. But the idea that one could make a serious political speech in this homey language seemed comical to them” (237); [. . .] “Even though some of my friends showed contempt for Yiddish, I defended it. I showed them how racy and powerful it could be and how it lent itself to the most beautiful, the most subtle and delicate thoughts. I felt at home with my Russian-

most of his life to the Yiddish-language newspaper *The Jewish Daily Forward*, which became a lifeline for newly arrived immigrants and a major institution of Yiddish culture.<sup>51</sup>

Yet, even among advocates of Yiddish, there was dissension, since Yiddish itself was not uniform. The Yiddish of the Galicians, Poles, and Romanians used different vowels from that of Lithuanians, and Hungarians spoke a variant of Yiddish that was closer to German (Sorin 101). The Yiddish theater also contributed to linguistic confusion in the Jewish quarter. According to Cahan, who believed in realistic language, “[s]imple Yiddish was also avoided on the Jewish stage. The Jewish theater rang with *Deutschmerisch*, a jargon of Yiddish and German, so that it was not unusual to witness the depiction on the stage of a pious Jew or even a synagogue sexton delivering long passages in *Deutschmerisch*” (*The Education of Abraham Cahan* 307). In his recollection of a conversation with a member of the Yiddish theater, Cahan describes *Deutschmerisch* as a kind of “ridiculous Yiddish” made up of broken German, indicating his familiarity with the concept of *mauscheln*.<sup>52</sup>

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speaking friends. But I felt a strong attraction to the Yiddish language, more than I had ever felt in Russia” (281) Yet Cahan himself never got over elevating the Russian language over Yiddish as a language for intellectual discussion, admitting that “Russian was the language of my intellectual self. I thought in Russian” (281).

<sup>51</sup> Cahan dedicated his newspapers to the common man, using “the simplest Yiddish so that even the most uneducated worker could understand it.” He often had to defend his practice to Jewish intellectuals, who, like those who wrote for the theater, felt that Yiddish was not “high” enough for public discourse. “How can you write Yiddish just as it is spoken?” Cahan recalls being asked. “In writing Yiddish, the language ought to be embellished so that it sounds more respectable” (397).

<sup>52</sup> Cahan recalls, “I once asked Karp, who had arrived with the first professional Yiddish actors in 1884, why he spoke *Deutschmerisch* instead of Yiddish on stage. He replied that it was the duty of the Jewish actor to elevate and educate his audience by teaching it to talk a more refined speech than common Yiddish.

He couldn’t understand that his *Deutschmerisch* sounded only like some kind of ridiculous Yiddish. He was certain that even broken German was more beautiful than unbroken Yiddish” (308).

In order to standardize the language, scholar Alexander Harkavy created an English-Yiddish dictionary and a *Yiddish*-Yiddish dictionary. Cahan, like Harkavy, was Lithuanian and used Lithuanian Yiddish exclusively in *The Jewish Daily Forward*. As Litvaks began to outnumber other nationalities in the Jewish community over time, Lithuanian Yiddish took hold as the official mode of discourse (237). Yet the already particolored fabric of Yiddish also showed signs of what seemed at first to language purists like Cahan to be the incompatible hues of English, as Jewish immigrants adopted word like “vindes” (windows), “silings” (ceilings), and “pehtaytess” (potatoes) into their common speech (*The Education of Abraham Cahan* 242).<sup>53</sup>

Thus, the cultural body in which Jewish immigrant writers began to publish their fiction pulsed with the life-blood of many different nationalities striving to speak their complex experience in a language equal to the task but often encumbered by prejudicial views of their own means of expression. Just as it was for the Norwegians, language was taxonomic for Jewish immigrants at the turn of the century, classifying the speaker as well as the meaning and significance of what was said. Competing discourses, particularly in the realm of religion, often became strident in their demands for primacy as many Jews struggled to hold on to their language and the ultimate values they associated with it, even as they sought competency in a new one, for over this Babel loomed the English language, which many recognized would eventually engulf all other forms of discourse. Amongst these intertwining, sometimes harmonious, sometimes

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<sup>53</sup> Although Cahan was at first appalled by Americanized Yiddish, he later saw it as a means for immigrant adaptation to American life, and he freely used it in *The Jewish Daily Forward*. In one article for an American newspaper, Cahan composed a typical Yiddish-American sentence to illustrate the admixture of Yiddish and English in daily life: “Ich vel scrobbin dem floor, klinen die vindes un polishen dem stov” (*The Education of Abraham Cahan* 355-6).



dissonant Jewish voices, immigrant novelists Lawrence Sterner and Abraham Cahan examined the politics of language in the new world and its relationship to ethno-religious integrity through the lens of the rich and ambivalent linguistic heritage they inherited from the old world. As a result, their work often reveals fascinating reformulations of the images of the “good” and the “bad” Jew according to the ways in which they either assented to or dissented from non-Jewish assumptions about Jewish language. Although their novels were almost exactly contemporaneous, the two differ drastically in their visions of the Yiddish-speaking Jew. Sterner’s work betrays its direct descent from Moses Mendelssohn and the assimilationist platform of the *Haskala*, while Cahan’s novel offers a much more ambivalent presentation of the Eastern Jew, one that redistributes the virtues and vices of previous portraits in the face of a uniquely American experience.

Sterner’s novel *The Unchristian Jew* was granted a copyright in 1917 and was published by the author in 1919 at the close of World War I, when Americanization efforts and anti-Semitism surged in America. The Leo Frank case of 1914 had enflamed pre-existing American prejudices against Jews, who were viewed as both money kings and socialist radicals. Sterner, a German Jew who had strong socialist sympathies (whether Tolstoyan or otherwise is not clear), was later active on the American stage, writing and performing in the 1920s in rather frivolous and racy comedies with titles like *The Club’s Baby* and *T.N.T. (or) Behave*. *The Unchristian Jew*, which concerns the failure of both Christians and Jews to fulfill their moral responsibilities to their fellow human beings in the capitalist economic order of America, seems uncharacteristic of his later career, yet it clearly depicts the difficulties caused by Jewish sensitivity to the moral agency of language when issues of assimilation spilled over into Jewish cultic

observance. Sterner uses language and ritual to draw contrasting portraits of two major characters along the lines of the linguistic split in the Jewish self-image begun by Moses Mendelssohn, portraits which locate the “bad Jew” in the Yiddish-speaking ritualized Jew of the Russian Pale and the “good Jew” in the rational, acculturated reformer of the West.

The novel opens at sundown on a Friday evening as Simeon Sachs, a prosperous New York Jew, performs his Sabbath observance with his family. Sachs is a member of the most orthodox congregation in New York City, one of those Jews, according to the narrative, who “still zealously cling to Saturday as a day of worship and rest—scorning Sunday as they scorn Christ, and condemning as traitors to their faith those who transfer their Sabbath to the ‘Christian’ Sunday” (8). In the dining room, which is “ostentatious” and “overfurnished,” with numerous gilt-framed paintings and silver serving dishes, the narrative tells us that Sachs “rattled off his prayers at a tremendous speed [. . . ] All the while he prayed, he swayed back and forth, presumably to mark his deep emotion” (12). On the little finger of each of his hands, Sachs exhibits “a large diamond of the first water” (12). In short, Sterner presents Sachs as the coarse and ostentatious Jew, the parvenu, whose love of ritual corresponds to his fumbling attempts to gain status in the eyes of the world by elevating superficial show over substance. While Sachs uses the ritualized gestures and language of the Sabbath observance to make statements to himself and his family regarding an ethno-religious social order he supposedly believes is sacrosanct, Sterner undercuts these statements with a presentation of Sachs as a Jew whose embarrassing rituals are merely props to an economic order that is in fact immoral

and hypocritical. In his ironic treatment of Sachs' Sabbath rites, Sterner indicates his own repudiation of a ritual order he sees as antithetical to moral behavior.

Sachs corresponds in many ways to the old European stereotypes of the "bad Jew" internalized by German-speaking Jews of the *Haskalah*. Significantly, Sachs' language and his attitudes toward the ritual use of language are the chief indicators of his marginal status. Sachs speaks and writes Yiddish and Hebrew fluently (8). Additionally, in a novel populated with Russians, Germans, and Swedes, he is the only character who speaks in any kind of dialect—in this case, a heavily accented English, sprinkled with Yiddish, and laden with grammatical errors, a direct descendant of *mauscheln*. Sachs, like the European stereotype, uses *mauscheln* in his ruthless business dealings. In the following excerpt, Sterner uses Sachs' Yiddish speech as the sign of the superficial, hypocritical, materialistic Jew who in his attempt to deceive unsuspecting customers haggles with a salesman over the price of a teakettle, the finish of which, like the gilt of ritual over hypocritical religion, masks its shoddy interior:

Durability, style and price means nothing to this biznus! I buy the style I vant at my own price, and if the goods don't veer, that's the customer's biznus; not mine! [. . .] Now don't get angry because you got no brains. You're like the rest of the *shlemeels* I've got about me. (27)

Like Herzl's character *Mauschel*, Sachs shrugs off any loyalty to values other than those of buying and selling. Sterner's Simeon Sachs is the *Ostjude*, the Yiddish-speaking, ritualized Jew, as reformulated by Herzl, a man whose language and religious practice reveal his commitment to form over substance and his indifference to matters of morality.

Further, Sachs attends Sabbath services at the Temple B'nai-Israel, where Sterner's description of the manner of worship again echoes newspaper accounts of Pentecostal tongues:

Opening the door of the Temple, one became suddenly transported into the heart of Palestine during the days of Moses, Ezra, and the Maccabees. A very Babel of almost savage confusion and incantation met the eye and ear [. . .] They all had on praying shawls, and the majority kept swaying to and fro, calling upon the God of Israel, in the Hebrew tongue, with loud, sorrowful, dissonant, unrhythmic wail, while intermittently they held conversations with their neighbors on business and other secular topics. (18-19)

Such descriptions clearly link Jewish ritual practice and extraordinary language to Gentile images of the conjuring Eastern Jew like that of Cellini, as well as German Jewish caricatures of their primitive, materialistic, and unaesthetic co-religionists.

Sachs, who hurries through his own Sabbath prayers, is particularly troubled by the changes to the language used for worship instituted by the recently arrived Rabbi Cordova. To his daughter, Rachel, who secretly admires Cordova, he has already complained:

Cordova uses vords that are not Jewish, and I don't like to see you do it, too. I should never have allowed him to introduce English sermons into the service [. . .] Ve must have more Hebrew teachers [. . .] Rabbi Adster got on very vell without English. All he did vas to remind us ve vere God's chosen people, --that our God is the only true God, and Moses the only lawgiver. It don't require English to tell you that. (15)

Sachs' words thus fuse the man who wishes to maintain the linguistic traditions of his people with a blind and mechanical approach to religion.

Rabbi Cordova, on the other hand, like Moses Mendelssohn and Isaac Meyer Wise, seeks to modernize and universalize Judaism. In his search for the perennial truths in all religions, he has discovered a deep sympathy for the teachings of Christ.<sup>54</sup> Before his emigration to the United States, Cordova, in his travels over Europe, came to view the “insidious perversions” of Judaism and Christianity in the religious practices of contemporary Europeans as dangerously superstitious and divisive. Cordova's pursuit of truth and reason in religion then led to his banishment from Jewish houses of worship in Europe. He has recently come to America, where “the torch of Freedom burn[s] brightly,” in hopes of modernizing Judaism, lifting it out of its isolating use of ritual, and establishing an ecumenical rapprochement between Christians and Jews rational enough to recognize the commonalities between their two faiths.

Again, Cordova's use of the Word signifies his character. First of all, Cordova is gifted with a soul-transporting singing voice, which he uses to great effect in the temple. Second, like Isaac Meyer Wise, he has pursued his English language studies with such diligence that, although he has been in America only a short time, his speech is that of a highly educated, native-born American (20). When Cordova confronts Sachs on behalf of underpaid and poorly treated workers, the “good Jew” and the “bad Jew” face off as linguistic foils:

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<sup>54</sup> Sterner presents Cordova as a Rumanian Jew of Spanish descent, linking him to Sephardic Jews who were the first Jewish immigrants to arrive in America in the 1600s. Spanish and Portuguese Jews enjoyed special caste status as the aristocratic top tier of a hierarchy of Jewish nationalities in America, and their vernacular, Ladino, was held in similar esteem.

Cordova: My visit involves a principle upon which I should like to be informed.

Sachs: Vhat principle?

Cordova: The principle of purchasing an article at a price that will afford a decent living to the artist or artisan producing it.

Sachs: You vant me to pay more than my competitors for goods so that the hands that make them can have more vages? [. . .] You may be able to give sermons on Shakespeare, but vhen you come to talk biznus, --vell, you'll excuse me for saying so, but you're a bit of a fool! [. . .]

Cordova: Does your conscience never lead you to inquire into the effects of these [. . .] business transactions?

"Conscience?" Sachs said, shrugging his shoulders. "Vhat's conscience got to do with biznus? Conscience is religion: taking care of your vife and children; biznus is profit: buying cheap and selling dear (41-2).

Sachs' comments about conscience almost exactly reproduce those of Herzl's *Mauschel*: "Honor? Who needs it if business is good?" That the recently arrived Cordova speaks formal English with complete grammatical precision, while Sachs, an American resident for over thirty years, speaks "Yiddishized" English is explicable only by recourse to the old stereotypes of the rational and assimilative "good Jew" and the irrational and argumentative "bad Jew," whose *mauscheln*, like his mindless pursuit of ritual practice, reveals his corruption, his superficiality, and his fossilized intellect.

Cordova's confrontation with Sachs over his inhuman treatment of the workers who produce his goods leads him to preach a controversial sermon at the next Sabbath

service at the temple. Disturbed over Sachs' materialism and lack of concern for his fellow men, Cordova chooses the First Commandment, "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me," as the text for his sermon. The narrative tells us specifically that Rabbi Cordova "gave the words twice in Hebrew; then twice in English; each time slowly, earnestly, with accents and pauses that brought out the full force of that momentous command" (44). Cordova's ritualized use of the language of the Torah in both Hebrew and English communicates an important but unspoken message to the congregation about its ultimate concerns: that the heart of the Hebrew faith lies in its ethics, which are no less valid and necessary in the new world than in the old. The switch from the language of Israel to that of America also implicitly suggests an allegiance to the values of assimilation and progress rather than to the petrified practice of a religious community that isolates itself from the world at large. While Cordova's linguistic strategies indicate his desire to bring Israel into the American social body, he is nevertheless treading on dangerous ground, for again, as Durkheim recognized, in ritual "we speak a language that we did not make" in order to receive transpersonal wisdom. Thus, as Beret Holm understood, the question of *which* language should be the conduit for spiritual truth and power is crucial. At stake is a choice between a sacred language given from heaven specifically for the Jewish people and a secular language symbolizing the imposition of the values of a culture perceived as profane.

Cordova's sermon first lauds the values of Judaism, "social equality, universal love, and peace"(44), which he believes brought about a major leap out of the sorcery, fetishism, and superstition of the old religions of the Middle East. Now, however, he sees the perversion of those values by Jews in the American marketplace. The true Jewish

cult, according to Cordova, is the Law of Moses, a universal code of ethics, inscribed in the heart, that surpasses the empty forms of ritual practice and demands fair treatment of one's neighbors. The Rabbi's eloquent sermon, directed at Sachs, goes one step too far, however. His ecumenical theology leads him to utter one particular word that outrages the congregation—the name of Christ: “Ye that do these things are still the generation of vipers whose money tables Jesus, called Christ, overturned in the temple!” Cordova declares, “Ye are unspiritual,— unchristian Jews!” (45)

The narrative then relates the effects of this radical use of language in a ritual context upon the congregation:

Had a shell from an enemy's ship exploded in their midst, it could not have caused greater consternation than the utterance of the name “Christ” in that Jewish sanctuary. The whole congregation rose in a panic [. . .] In any place of worship it is most unusual for a congregation to interrupt the preacher,— to shout him down as at any political meeting [. . .] Certainly never in the history of Judaism had any Rabbi dared to desecrate the house of God by uttering the name of Christ within it, much less to set “him” up as a guide for Jewish conduct [. . .] Could they ever congregate again in those polluted walls? Would all the perfumes of Arabia cleanse the air within of that most hated name, Jesus Christ! The men cried out in horror; the women wept, exclaiming: “He must have lost his reason.” (45-6)

Sterner's description of the rarity of public interruption of sermons recalls Bloch's theory of ritual's distinctive use of language to induce obligation by reducing the potential for competing utterance. Yet, Cordova's decision to speak the name of Christ before a



community especially sensitive to the power of the word, whose terrible history resulted from this *particular* word calls forth chaos in the sanctuary. Not only does the name recall the dark experience of Jews with Christians, it also suggests the inevitable erosion of Judaism in the face of an American society allied with Christianity, a fate already intimated in the Rabbi's intonation of the law first in Hebrew and then in English. Furthermore, as Malinowski and Austin suggest, the name of Christ uttered in a ritual context has the illocutionary power to transform the world of the congregation, in this case to pollute it. In this instance, the congregation feels it must repudiate its own ritual order to avoid pollution by misuse of language in a ritual context by a radical newcomer. Amid the furor, Sachs forces Cordova to step down and takes possession of the rostrum. The Rabbi then repudiates the ritual order himself by giving up his rabbinate completely, starting a Utopian community called, significantly, "Quality Town," a place in which superficial yet divisive rituals are forbidden and universal ethics based on reason are practiced by all.

Sterner's novel scrutinizes the criteria by which true religious practice should be judged against the backdrop of the conflicting hierarchy of languages carried over from Europe, and made even more complex in its new American context. To indict the practice of capitalism by hypocritically religious Jews, Sterner uses the ritualized speaker of Yiddish as the embodiment of the Jew who sells his moral birthright for a mess of pottage; yet, like Herzl, whose *Mauschel* Sachs so plainly emulates, Sterner turns to the same tools used by anti-Semites out of their long-standing misperception of Jewish language.

The linguistic boundary lines used by Sterner reflect the clean split in the Jewish self-image between the “good Jew” and the “bad Jew” begun in the Middle Ages and brought to fruition in Moses Mendelssohn. In the work of Abraham Cahan, who was perhaps a more astute observer of human nature and who wrote fiction among Russian Jews who struggled to be individuals under the weight of such images, those lines are much more circuitous and recursive, as Cahan explored the distortions of these stereotypes brought about by the new American hall of mirrors. Cahan’s novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* is the story of one man’s long fall from moral and linguistic grace through three distinct periods of time, the first of which concerns his seven-year enclosure as an adolescent in a ritualized realm of sacred language where he continually reads the Talmud with a multitude of devout Jewish men in his native village of Antomir. The character of David Levinsky has been described as the stunted fruit of an unappeasable hunger formed in childhood and never satisfied (Rosenfeld 276). Yet, there is one moment in the novel when David *is* fulfilled, and that is during his tenure as a student reading Talmud at the Yeshiva. Although David loses his mother during this period and is left destitute, he fondly describes this time as one of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual fulfillment created by a devotion to the ritualized reading of the Word. Talmud reading consists of a collective, periodic, and highly stylized use of Hebrew and Aramaic, with elaborate rules regarding how the sacred text should be read. It is a religious practice that involves the whole person, a music for the intellect and for the emotions, a religious dance of the body with its own special choreography using the head, hands, and torso. The effect of this ancient ritual practice is often a form of religious ecstasy. David explains, “to read [the books of the Talmud], to drink deep of their sacred

wisdom, is accounted one of the greatest ‘good deeds’ in the life of a Jew” (27). Thus, David and other pious Jews in Antomir keep vigil by reading the holy word day and night “in a hundred variations of the same singsong, literally every minute of the year, except the hours of prayer (28).<sup>55</sup>

The ritual practice of intoning the Talmud fulfills a variety of needs for the orphaned David. First, it satisfies his intellectual curiosity. The intricate puzzles of the Talmud and the argumentation of the *pilpul*, while from David’s later standpoint seemingly obtuse and archaic, provide a medium for intellectual development allied with moral and religious values. David describes the Talmud as “a voluminous work of about twenty ponderous tomes [. . .] It is however, as much a source of intellectual interest as an act of piety. If it be true that our people represent a high percentage of mental vigor, the distinction is probably due in some measure to the extremely important part which Talmud studies have played in the spiritual life of the race” (28). Never again will David find the intellectual gratification he experiences in Talmudic argument and interpretation.

The ritual chanting of the sacred text also provides an outlet for emotion and raises David into a higher spiritual realm. The following passage deserves to be quoted at length because of the insight it gives into the emotional significance of Talmudic recitation in David’s early life:

My Talmud singsong reflected my moods. Sometimes it was a spirited recitative, ringing with cheery self-consciousness and the joy of being a lad of sixteen; at other times it was a solemn song, aglow with devotional ecstasy. When I

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<sup>55</sup>The novel also shows that piety and spiritual devotion based on the power of the word were not limited to Jewish male practice. A devout Jewish woman in Antomir named Shiphrah Minsker, whose daughter is the first love of David’s life, provides food for eighteen poor Talmud students because “eighteen is the numerical value of the Hebrew word for life” (58).

happened to be dejected in the common-place sense of the word, it was a listless murmur, doleful or sullen. But then the very reading of the Talmud was apt to dispel my gloom. My voice would gradually rise and ring out, vibrating with intellectual passion.

The intonations of the other scholars, too, echoed the voices of their hearts, some of them sonorous with religious bliss, others sad, still others happy-go-lucky. Although absorbed in my book, I would have a vague consciousness of the connection between the various singsongs and their respective performers [. . .] All these voices blended in a symphonic source of inspiration for me. It was divine music in more senses than one.

The ancient rabbis of the Talmud, the *Tanaim* of the earlier period and the *Amoraim* of later generations, were living men. I could almost see them, each of them individualized in my mind [. . .] I pictured their faces, their beards, their voices [. . . ;] they were all superior human beings, godly, unearthly, denizens of a world that had been ages ago and would come back in the remote future when Messiah should make his appearance. (37-8) <sup>56</sup>

In this passage David uses musical metaphors to describe the way in which the ritual use of language unites him synchronically and diachronically with his fellow readers, the holy men of the past, and the Messiah of the future in one collective song that transcends

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<sup>56</sup> David's words anticipate those of Old Testament scholar and theologian Abraham Heschel, who later described his experience of the Talmud's ability to transport the reader to heights of spiritual experience in a similar way: "Carried away by the mellow, melting chant of Talmud-reading, one's mind soared high in the pure realm of thought, away from this world of facts and worries, away from the boundaries of the here and now, to a region where the Divine Presence listens to what Jews create in the study of His word" (qtd. in Howe 13).

ordinary life.<sup>57</sup> Experiences like this one inspire David spiritually, grant him a glimpse of beauty, and alleviate his loneliness, which becomes ever more chronic in the later part of the novel. Furthermore, David's friendship with Reb Sender, the deepest and most emotionally satisfying friendship of his life, is formed around their mutual devotion to the recitation of the word. Reb Sender is a pious Jew, "a dreamer with a noble imagination, with a soul full of beauty" (31), who has "no acquaintance with the face of a coin" (29), and represents what David might have been had he been able to retain the beliefs and ideals of his youth. Reb Sender passionately encourages David, saying, "if you love God you must be ready to suffer for it (29). He then continues with this advice:

Study the Word of God, Davie dear, [. . .] There is no happiness like it. What is wealth? A dream of fools. What is this world? A mere curl of smoke for the wind to scatter. Only the other world has substance and reality; only good deeds and holy learning have tangible worth. (31)

Reb Sender's fidelity to the moral integrity of the word leads him to give the following advice, which is significant in the face of David's later misuse of language: "Above all, don't be double-faced; never say what you do not mean" (32).

Finally, the words of the Talmud, which David utters over and over again in a ritual context, accomplish the transformation of the world described by Malinowski and Austin. The words of the Talmud, intoned in the manner prescribed by tradition, make David's world holy and make him yearn for the holy. In addition, as the ritual transmitter and receiver of messages regarding his ultimate concerns, David becomes the instrument of the sacralization of his own world. During this period, David tells us:

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<sup>57</sup> David also describes reading with Reb Sender "in duet" and Reb Sender as gesticulating with his snuff-box "much as the conductor of an orchestra does his baton" (30).

[As] I read my Talmud, conscious of [God's] approval of me, tears of bliss would come into my eyes. I loved Him as one does a woman. Often while saying my prayers I would fall into a veritable delirium of religious infatuation.

Sometimes this fit of happiness and yearning would seize me as I walked in the street. "O Master of the World! Master of the Universe! I love you so!" I would sigh. "Oh, how I love you!" (38-9).

Similarly, in accord with Bloch's theories, the repeated declamation of the Talmud in the ritualized setting allows for its use in argumentation but precludes any disputation of the text itself. Consequently, through the suppression of all countertexts, the text of the Talmud, which is "primarily concerned with questions of conscience, religious duty, and human sympathy" (28), is experienced as true and binding on all readers. Again, as Bloch has argued, the special language required by the ritual setting enforces the obligatory nature of these morally binding principles. To refute them necessitates the abandonment of the ritual order. Yet, as the novel makes painfully clear, the inverse of Bloch's argument is also true: David's later repudiation of the ritual order also means the loss of the sense of obligation to the moral maxims its language instills.

The first period of David's biography abruptly closes when he journeys from Antomir to America. In the epic of his religio-linguistic metamorphosis, however, the first phase continues for a short time after his emigration. When a garment manufacturer asks the newly arrived David what he does for a living, David answers, "I read Talmud." The manufacturer answers, "I see. But that's no business in America" (91). Despite its seeming irrelevance in the American context, however, David continues to seek out opportunities to read Talmud in the synagogue because its special language and the

unique manner in which it is intoned provide a sense of comfort through memories of his cherished friendship with Reb Sender; and, at a time in which David struggles to overcome the stereotype of the greenhorn, his declamation of Talmudic wisdom instills a sense of obligation to values beyond those of assimilation and acquisition as well as a sense of continuity with his former identity:

Whatever enthusiasm there was in me found vent in religion. I spent many an evening at the Antomir Synagogue, reading Talmud passionately. This would bring my heart in touch with my old home, with dear old Reb Sender, with the grave of my poor mother. It was the only pleasure I had in those days, and *it seemed to be the highest I ever enjoyed*. At times I would feel the tears coming to my eyes for the sheer joy of hearing my own singsong, my old Antomir singsong. It was like an echo from the Preacher's Synagogue. *My former self was addressing me across the sea* in this strange, uninviting, big town where I was compelled to peddle shoe-black or oil-cloth and to compete with a yelling idiot. I would picture my mother gazing at me as I stood at my push-cart. I could almost see her slapping her hands in despair. (109, emphasis added)

In this and other passages, David continually compares the sacred unified music he once made with his co-religionists at the Preacher's Synagogue to the strident competitive language of survival used in the capitalist marketplace: "I hated the constant chase and scramble for bargains and I hated to yell and scream in order to create a demand for my wares by the sheer force of my lungs" (107). His former choir members are now competitors, diminished versions of those who once sang holy words and danced sacred meaning with their bodies:

One fellow in particular was a source of discouragement to me. He was a half-witted, hideous-looking man, with no end of vocal energy and senseless fervor.

He was a veritable engine of imbecile vitality. He would make the street ring with deafening shrieks, working his arms and head, sputtering and foaming at the mouth like a madman. And it produced results [. . .] One could not help pausing and buying something from him. (107-8)

These passages are especially poignant when viewed as the sad counterpoint to David's descriptions of his Antomir friend and fellow-reader Naphtali whose singsong is the most beautiful in the synagogue and with whom David "would sit up reading, side by side" throughout the night, until the worshipers came to morning service, a pastime he describes as "one of the joys of my existence in those days" (38): "Naphtali had little to say to other people, but he seemed to have much to say to himself. His singsongs were full of meaning, of passion, of beauty. Quite often he would sing himself hoarse" (38).

As David gains a foothold, however, the first phase in this ironic *bildungsroman* gradually fades into the second, during which David's passion to learn English eclipses his love for the music of the Talmud. Like many immigrants, David sees English as the key to both social and economic success and pursues it with the diligence he once gave to his Talmudic practice, attending English classes "with religious fervor" (133). As David drifts away from the ritual practice of Talmud reading, his sense of obligation to the moral use of language also slips away and his tendency to misuse language becomes more and more apparent. David admits to coming to the synagogue to read Talmud only to drop the book in order to seek out prostitutes who "lie and sham" to him just as he does to his customers (125). He becomes friends with men like Max Margolis, who



misuses language to tell coarse stories about women. Most significantly, when he becomes employed in a sweat-shop, he tolerates the blasphemous antics of a fellow garment worker, whose favorite prank “was to burlesque some synagogue chant from the solemn service of the Days of Awe, with disgustingly coarse Yiddish in place of the Hebrew of the prayer. But he was not a bad fellow, by any means [. . .] He was fond of referring to himself as my ‘rabbi’ which is Hebrew for teacher, and that was the way I would address him, at first playfully, and then as a matter of course” (154-5). The passage makes plain the degree to which David’s friendships have fallen from the sacred camaraderie he once shared with Reb Sender. Further, David’s passivity at the perversion of Jewish ritual language reflects the extent to which he has become estranged from its moral agency.

David eventually moves out of the Jewish neighborhood and goes to live in an Irish boarding house to learn English, describing speakers of English in the same language he formerly used to describe the holy men of the Talmud: “people who were born to speak English were superior beings” (176). However, David’s romanticizing of the English language and his desire to master it are undercut by Meyer Nodelman, a Jewish friend who is “[c]rassly illiterate save for the ability to read some Hebrew without knowing the meaning of the words,” who tells David in Yiddish and broken English that there is another kind of language in America that makes all formal education moot—money. In an analogy reminiscent of Kafka’s *A Report to the Academy*, Nodelman asks, “What is a man without capital? Nothing! Nobody cares for him. He is like a beast. A beast can’t talk, and he can’t. ‘Money talks’ as the Americans say” (181). In order to be

liberated from his cage, the Jew must still acquire the language of assimilation, but now, in the American capitalist scene, that language is money.

When David later moves in with Max Margolis and his family, who embody the complex dynamics among first and second-generation immigrants over language, David becomes enamored of his friend's wife and watches her as she simultaneously prods her daughter to become proficient at English even as she envies her the opportunity to learn it and grieves over the loss of relationship she feels will inevitably follow her daughter's mastery of English. David wages an all-out campaign to win Dora from Max, first speaking a silent language of looks and gestures, then using English to woo her when they are alone, "even when every word we said had an echo of intimacy with which the tongue we were learning to speak seemed to be out of accord" (275). When David finally declares his love to Dora, however, he reverts to Yiddish, the language of the heart (278).

As their affair progresses, David recounts a moment in which Dora, who, like Reb Sender, feels that it is sweet to suffer for what is right, declares her willingness to take the consequences of her love for David, speaking in a style that recalls for him the ritual use of language for spiritual devotion in the synagogue: "It seems as if a great misfortune had befallen me. But I don't care. I don't care. I don't care [. . .] I am willing to suffer for it. Yes, I am willing to suffer for you, Levinsky" (280). David remembers, "she spoke with profound, even-voiced earnestness, with peculiar solemnity, as though chanting a prayer," but, having become estranged from the values such language instills, he confesses, "I was somewhat bored" (280).

The affair ends when Dora determines to devote herself to her daughter's happiness at the expense of her own. David, in turn, devotes himself to money-making,

and his fascination with “holy languages” degenerates into an obsession with the acquisition of American slang. He laments his lack of native-born acumen in words that echo the biological theories of Jewish speech used by European anti-Semites in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “I would write down every new piece of slang, the use of the latest popular phrase being, as I thought, helpful in making oneself popular with Americans [. . .] That I was not born in America was something like a physical defect that asserted itself in many disagreeable ways—a physical defect which, alas! no surgeon in the world was capable of removing” (291). On the sales circuit, this “physical defect” becomes the subject of mockery by German Jews who heap ridicule upon David as the gesticulating, Talmud-reading *Ostjude*. Loeb, a competing salesman, tells anti-Semitic jokes about Russian Jews like David:

One of the things about which he often made fun of me was my Talmud gesticulations, a habit that worried me like a physical defect. It was so distressingly un-American. I struggled hard against it. I had made efforts to speak with my hands in my pockets; I had devised other means for keeping them from participating in my speech. All of no avail. I still gesticulate a great deal, though much less than I used to. [. . .] I laughed with the others, but I felt like a cripple who is forced to make fun of his own deformity. It seemed to me as though Loeb, who was a Jew, was holding up our whole race to the ridicule of the Gentiles. I could have executed him as a traitor to his own people. (328)

Yet later, on the same train, David dines with Gentiles and struggles to speak “with exaggerated apathy,” to keep his hands still so as not to conform to the stereotype of the gesticulating Jew, and berates himself for having talked too much (329).

David now admits to having no religious belief. His only commitment is to the Social Darwinism of Spencer; but he nevertheless believes that religion is an important social institution and contributes to its support. As he enters the final stage of his linguistic decline, David, successful by means of his ruthless business practices but intensely lonely, attempts to regain the sense of moral integrity and community he experienced in his youth by finding a bride from an Orthodox family with “an atmosphere of Talmudic education” (377). During one period of courtship, his prospective father-in-law brings his son to read Talmud for David. David’s reaction is characteristic of his complex character. While he is deeply affected by the boy’s Talmud reading, which catapults him back into his own past at the Preacher’s Synagogue, he also confesses, “[t]hat an American school-boy should read Talmud seemed a joke to me. I could not take Rubie’s holy studies seriously” (397).

David’s longing for a language that can resacralize his world like his ritualized reading of the Talmud once did leads him to seek the hand of Anna Tevkin, the daughter of a once-renowned Hebrew poet who now sells real estate in America. Significantly, at a Jewish resort hotel in the Catskills, the sylph-like Anna emerges before David out of the Babel of a crowd of Jewish immigrants who have become estranged from their linguistic roots: “there was a hubbub of broken English, the gibberish being mostly spoken with self-confidence and ease. Indeed, many of these people had some difficulty speaking their native tongue. Bad English replete with literal translations from untranslatable Yiddish idioms had become their natural speech” (426). Although he becomes obsessed with Anna, his obsession with her stems largely from his fascination with the poetic language used by her father. David goes to the library and checks out three books of Tevkin’s

poetry, “written in the holy tongue, a language I had not used for more than eighteen years” (451). The words of one poem leap out at David as they serve to lament his own experience:

Hush! the night is speaking. Each twinkle of a star is a word from the world beyond. It is the language of men who were once here, but are no more. A thousand generations of departed souls are speaking to us in words of twinkling stars. I seem to be one of them. I hear my own ghost whispering to me: ‘Alas! It says, “Alas!”’ (452)

In his desperate attempt to recapture the emotional and moral milieu created by the religious language of his youth, David spends long hours with Tevkin and his family, the members of which are all devoted Socialists and Zionists who find David’s allegiance to capitalism hard to swallow. On one occasion when the subject of the Hebrew language comes up, David refers to it as a dead language. His companions protest, saying, “Oh no! Not any longer, Mr. Levinsky. It has risen from the dead. For centuries the tongue of our fathers spoke from the grave to us. Now, however, it has come to life again” (463). Once again, one’s proximity to the Hebrew language serves as a taxonomic indicator of moral integrity, but this time, Gentile assumptions are reversed. For David, who has lost his moral underpinnings, Hebrew is a dead language. For the Zionists who are committed to a holy cause, it is very much alive.

Yet, even among the Tevkins, the ancient connection to Hebrew as a holy language has lost its original purity. When David attends the Passover *seder* at Tevkin’s home, the ceremony is fragmented and confused because none of the children who must ask the four questions in Hebrew is either willing to participate or able to speak the

language. In contrast to the symphony of Talmudic recitation at Antomir, David compares Tevkin's Passover service to an opera in which each singer performs his own part in a different language. Tevkin himself, who remains at the table to chant the final ballads of the Passover ritual alone, dismisses them as "charming bits of folklore" (496). David fails to find the connection to the passionate ritualized language of his youth in his liaison with the Tevkin family, and his courtship of Anna ends in rejection and despair. David is left to mourn his lost self, the enraptured boy chanting Talmud at the Preacher's Synagogue in a world made holy by the word.

In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Cahan performs a fantasia on the old anti-Semitic theme of Jewish language, modulating and recapitulating it in new keys. Significantly, the first words David learns in America are "All right," a harbinger of his eventual development into what Cahan called an "Allrightnik," his American version of Herzl's *Mauschel*. While David strives to avoid Yiddishisms and gesticulations, the external trappings of *Mauschel*, inwardly he nevertheless conforms to the stereotype, doing business at the expense of the poor, refusing to identify himself with any cause greater than his own self-advancement, misusing the Jewish legacy of moral language for personal gain, and attending synagogue only because it is fashionable to do so, all the while engaging in self-pity over the outcome of his life. In contrast, Reb Sender, David's old friend at the Preacher's Synagogue, who cares nothing for money and everything for moral beauty, defies the stereotype of the Yiddish-speaking *Ostjude* as a figure of greed and barbarism, and serves as a pious foil to David in a manner similar to Buber's Chasidic figures.

Cahan also plays a subtle game with the old European stereotypes of Talmudic discourse as conducive of spiritual blindness, materialism, and deceit. Contrary to Gentile assumptions, David feels most connected to what is holy and strives hardest to be good only when engaged in ritual recitation. Reb Sender, who spends his life reading Talmud, has probably the clearest vision of anyone in the novel, offering David life-saving advice he fails to heed. The ritualized language of the Talmud, concerned with “conscience, religious duty, and human sympathy,” moors David to moral rectitude. Only when he abandons his ritual practice does he lose his moral compass. Yet David, raised on Talmudic interpretation, also seems strangely incapable of interpreting his own life and actions, and, having abandoned the ritual order in which he first used it, he drops into the Talmudic argumentative style of the *pilpul* when he seeks to exploit a business associate (203). By the end of the novel, David’s relationship to language has become so slippery that we suspect he may be manipulating us. In a confessional autobiography, this is surely the most tragic sign of his loneliness.

Both Ronald Sanders and Irving Howe describe *The Rise of David Levinsky* as Cahan’s own rueful ruminations, the self-examination of a difficult and driven man with an acrid temperament, “whose private self makes demands in behalf of ease, grace, and escape which his culture cannot satisfy,” and whose “public role traps him in an imperiousness of tone and repression of self which weary him all the more” (Howe 527). Cahan grew up in the town of Vilna, called “the Jerusalem of Lithuania,” a place of spiritual fame, and home to a famous Jewish mystic. In his autobiography, Cahan states that the period of his greatest religious fervor occurred during the time he spent chanting the Talmud in Yeshiva (61-2). In a memoir written with what Howe calls “a certain

Litvak dryness,” some of the most moving passages are Cahan’s descriptions of the religious milieu of his youth and its language:

After the [Sabbath] meal my father [. . .] reads the Midrash. My mother reads her Yiddish translation of the Pentateuch. I read my *Sefer Ha-Yosher*, book of morality in Yiddish. Sometimes, on these evenings my father reads aloud and makes my heart quiver. All of this was more than a half century ago. It is all so very far away and yet so clear, like the memory of a treasured song, a godly song. (38)

Cahan’s nostalgia and musical metaphors could have been written by David Levinsky himself, suggesting that, while he may not have been able to accept Orthodox theology, the religious world of his youth with its unique form of religious expression may have offered Cahan an emotional and artistic release that he never experienced anywhere else.

Cahan tells us little of his loss of faith in his late teens, except that he first felt relief at not having to fear God’s judgment, then went about trying to convert others to atheism (89). Cahan’s description of himself closely resembles his portrait of David’s childhood friend Naphtali of the beautiful voice, who subsequently becomes an atheist and destroys David’s faith in God. If Naphtali is based on Cahan himself, then it is important to recall that Naphtali also continues to chant Talmud in the most beautiful singsong in the synagogue even when he no longer believes (55). Naphtali’s ambivalence, when viewed in conjunction with other passages in the novel, such as the one in which David describes yearning for God “as one does a woman,” suggests that Cahan’s “dry Litvak” masked a soul for whom the ritual use of language may once have been the love poetry for a mystical relationship with God in which language, passion, and



the spirit were at least briefly united before his loss of faith, after which the spiritual outpourings of the Passover ballads became merely “charming bits of folklore.” Perhaps Cahan was remembering not only his early Socialist fervor but also the ecstasy aroused by the ritual use of the word in Orthodox Judaism and the sense of connection it provided to Jews and their highest concerns throughout history when, in a 1902 issue of *The Jewish Daily Forward*, he lamented, “I yearn for my greenness of old. *I yearn for my yearnings* of twenty years ago” (qtd. in Sanders 270). In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Cahan examines the difficulty of singing the Lord’s song by the rivers of Babylon and the heavy toll taken on the Jewish soul by the loss of its ancient vehicle for spiritual transport—the music of ritualized language.

All three of these immigrant novels reflect the relationship of the author to his holy community and to the language it used to maintain itself and the degree to which each author saw ritualized language as instrumental or detrimental to the preservation of moral and cultural integrity. Rölvaag considered the ritual use of Norwegian to be crucial to the survival of his culture and its capacity to contribute to American life, while Sterner clearly saw the persistence of Yiddish and orthodox ritual practice as signs of a Jewish isolationism and moral blindness that should be replaced by a rational socialist approach emphasizing ethics over aesthetics, and Abraham Cahan, with characteristic realism, saw both moral and aesthetic power in the musical language of ritual but also recognized that such subtle tones would inevitably be engulfed by the white noise of modern American life.

Dilemmas similar to the ones depicted by these immigrant novelists were no doubt repeated countless times as religious immigrants of all nationalities sought to voice

their experience of the holy in a culture whose language and mainstream religious practice often made such expression extremely difficult, if not suspect. Like the Pentecostals whose tongues of flame were often considered nothing more than the *ignis fatuus* of the ignorant, immigrants sought by means of their special use of language to strengthen the fibers of their holy cocoons at a time when modernizing intellectuals sought to direct mainstream religious discourse in America toward the rational, the ecumenical, and the progressive. When Flannery O'Connor, who spent her life speaking the ritualized language of the Catholic Church, was asked what type of Christian she would be if she could not be Catholic, she answered, without a beat, "Pentecostal Holiness." Perhaps she recognized both groups as American misfits who contorted ordinary speech in their attempts to express the inexpressible. By refusing to hang their harps on the willows of ordinary discourse, ritualized immigrants, like Pentecostals, offered a valuable counterstatement from the margins to mainstream religious America, one that, divisive though it may have seemed, nevertheless insisted that a true experience of the *mysterium tremendum* cannot be rationally discussed, but must be stuttered forth, or sung.

## Chapter Four: The Kalon-agathon: Immigrant Ritual and the Politics of

### Aesthetics

In his essay entitled “Filthy Rites” (1982), historian Stephen Greenblatt relates the story of Captain John Bourke, who, while gathering evidence in 1881 for his ethnographic study *Scatologic Rites of All Nations*, witnessed with horror the coprophagic rites of the Zuñi Indians. Greenblatt’s discussion focuses on Bourke’s use of his own revulsion at the human ingestion of bodily wastes in Native American ritual to initiate his epistemological project, arguing that “the very conception that a culture is alien rests upon the perceived difference of that culture from one’s own behavioral codes, and it is precisely at the points of perceived difference that the individual is conditioned, as a founding principle of personal and group identity, to experience disgust” (3). While Greenblatt’s argument emphasizes behavioral codes, it also raises the question of the underlying relationship between behavioral, or moral, codes and culturally defined aesthetic codes. Occurring as it did during the period when immigrants were entering the United States in large numbers with their “unknown gods and rites,” Bourke’s disgust at the “unaesthetic” rites of the Native American reflects the milieu into which religious immigrants sought to practice their own rituals, a new context in which ideals of the beautiful and the good, and their relationship to one another, were radically different from those that immigrants had taken for granted in the Old World. In Greenblatt’s view, the coprophagic rites of the Zuñis were part of their efforts to cope with their own cultural demise in the face of Anglo-American supremacy. Like the Zuñis, immigrants also needed their ritual practice to cope with an Anglo-American cultural order that often viewed that practice with disgust.

According to Greenblatt, part of Bourke's reaction was due to the Western perception of the body as "grotesque." Certainly, *immigrant* bodies were considered grotesque, as we have established, and were viewed as evidence of the immigrant's inherent immorality. As they experienced the negative judgments of the dominant culture regarding their aesthetic and moral deficiencies, immigrants, in turn, became particularly sensitive to questions of the beautiful and the good. These issues were intensified even more by the immigrants' entry into urban ghettos, the squalid conditions of which robbed them of any regular or sustained exposure to beauty, and the survivalist economics of which subverted their previous understanding of morality. Religious ritual, which often uses highly elaborate artistic means to enact the concerns of its participants, was therefore a particularly powerful and much-needed medium of aesthetic experience for the immigrant. In addition, immigrants came from positional societies in which conceptions of the beautiful and the good were inseparable from the collective moral teachings passed down through ancient tradition and enacted in ritual practice. In the new context of American capitalism, individualism, and ethnocentrism, immigrants sought desperately to know what Theodore Jennings calls "the fitting act," one in which the beautiful and the good are embodied in a single gesture. In the bewildering context of modern American life, however, the immigrants found that such was no longer easy to recognize or establish. Thus, for immigrants, ritual practice provided an alternative realm in which beauty could be experienced, and the fitting act, while difficult to ascertain in American culture, was, for once, clear.

The reassurance provided by ritual was complicated, however, by the immigrants' exposure to new American ideas of the beautiful and the good, which had become

increasingly separated from the moral order and manipulated in order to serve the needs of the capitalist economy. Some immigrants adopted those standards in their efforts to assimilate, and, in turn, experienced their own ritual practice as a point of confrontation between the old understanding of the ethico-aesthetic order and the new. Many of the most interesting examinations of this confrontation were undertaken by novelists from ethnic groups that many Americans considered especially unaesthetic and immoral, and whose ritual practice was most likely to arouse reactions like Bourke's. Because ritual so closely intertwines aesthetics with morality, the fiction of immigrant writers often utilizes ritual scenes to dramatize the immigrants' quest for the fitting act, their struggle to reformulate the relationship of the beautiful to the good in the context of American capitalism and ethno-centrism, to represent themselves as capable of aesthetic appreciation and discourse, and to encapsulate their own views on aesthetics and morality. In the process, these immigrant writers explore important questions: To what degree can morality safely be aestheticized? To what degree is aesthetics necessary to morality? In what ways, and under what conditions, do the two realms falsify, undermine, or destroy each other? Under what conditions does the pursuit of one interfere with the pursuit of the other? And to what degree does ritual enhance or confuse our perception of aesthetic and moral beauty?

The immigrant's struggle with the proper relationship between aesthetics and morality in America was symptomatic of a long-term philosophical tension in the West extending at least as far back as the ancient Greeks who formulated the idea of the *kalon-agathon*—that is, conduct having harmony, proportion, and grace. Marxist critic Terry Eagleton posits this concept as distinctive to pre-modern, organic societies, where the

three central concerns of philosophy—epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics—were intermeshed and culture did not function apart from the moral codes imposed by the social order (366). Most of these societies incorporated a ritual practice into their daily lives that made use of artistic strategies to engage their members in an existing ethical order. Hence, Eagleton maintains, the aesthetic “was not sharply separated from the ethico-political [. . .] because it could be seen as a form of social knowledge, conducted within certain normative ethical frameworks” (366). Eagleton argues that over time, and especially beginning in the eighteenth century with the development of capitalism, these three spheres became disconnected, each becoming specialized and sealed off from the other two. Knowledge became discontinuous with ethics and aesthetics and lost its commitment to value (367). As competition and exploitation became commonplace in the socio-economic sphere, ethics became dissociated from the social order itself so that questions of “What am I to do?” had to be answered without reference to one’s rights and responsibilities within the social relations of the *polis* (367). Instead, one had to answer ethical questions by a categorical imperative or by the emotional satisfaction gained from doing right (367). Finally, the aesthetic also became free floating and autonomous, serving purposes wholly its own, as culture became detached from social and political values.

Out of the fragmentation of a once holistic human practice, Eagleton maintains, the field of aesthetics as a pursuit in its own right developed as a compensatory realm wherein these three fields could be reunited in the imagination for a society in which such was no longer objectively possible, or even desired. Thus, in his *Critique of Judgment*, for example, Kant cordons off the beautiful from collective morality in locating value in

the artifact itself with its own laws and purposes distinct from its use or value to society. Eagleton argues that a philosophical strategy such as Kant's creates the art object as a kind of autonomous subject (3), a move that coincided with the capitalist construction of an aestheticized individual subject who, like a work of art, also obeyed his or her own laws, a vision of self-referentiality ideally suited to the needs of bourgeois society (9). Philosophers in the nineteenth century, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, continued the aestheticization of the subject, creating a whole philosophy based on the notion of self-creation according to the individual's intrinsic laws regardless of the needs of society. Eagleton laments what he sees as the splintering of human wholeness and the commodification of the beautiful by capitalism but, like Marx, believes that such splintering allowed humanity to use reason to free itself from the shackles of ecclesiastical, theological, and political control. In addition, Eagleton feels that the realm of the aesthetic, though continually dissociated from the political order up to the present time, provides a utopian vision of the reunification of knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics, and of "human energies as radical ends in themselves," a vision which is necessary for the large-scale transformation of society.

A similar utopian amalgam of human activities is also the goal and practice of religious ritual. In his important essay "On Ritual Knowledge," Theodore Jennings argues that "what is sought in the exploratory moment of ritual knowledge is the fitting or appropriate act. [ . . . ] We might be tempted to call such a criterion 'aesthetic'" (119). Jennings suggests here that ritual uses strategies that fuse the epistemological, the ethical, and the aesthetic in one arena in which the concerns of the participant are caught up in and subjugated to those of the larger social order through engagement in a pattern of

actions that simultaneously express aesthetic and moral values. Although a Marxist might look skeptically at religious ritual as a means of political revolution, in many ways it performs the same visionary functions that Eagleton specifies: It unifies the cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic realms in one human activity perceived as an end in itself, and is surely one of the normative and unifying frameworks Eagleton describes as being common to pre-modern societies which interwove the ethical and the aesthetic in the pursuit of the social knowledge of symbolic actions that exemplified one's obligations to God and one's fellow human beings.

Many immigrants came from societies that, although not immune from the changes brought on by capitalism and modernity, were also, in many ways, holistic, positional communities erected upon a ritualized order that defined the beautiful and the good as inseparable from the needs of the social body and allocated a place to each member within a constellation of relations that defined his or her obligations to the social order. One of the chief means of reinforcing this sense of obligation was the use of aesthetics in cultic devotion. In its appeal to the senses and in its dramatic spectacle, ritual became a kind of social art or theater for the immigrant that provided a means of aesthetic experience and expression while at the same time intensifying the participant's sense of obligation to the social order.

That ritual makes use of artistic strategies to engage participants in a moral order has been acknowledged by many ritual theorists. Emil Durkheim, who considered ritual's primary value to be moral and social (371), also insisted that, "in itself, the cult is something aesthetic" (382). Drawing from the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Catherine Bell argues that ritual is a type of social practice that simultaneously appeals to multiple



senses within the individual, including the aesthetic and moral senses (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* 77). Clifford Geertz closely identifies the use of symbols in ritual with the expression of ethos—that is, the moral and aesthetic aspects of culture (89-90). More specifically, Ron Williams and James Boyd suggest that rituals, like works of art, are “integrated combinations of artful means typically involving music, chanting, dance, gesture, and staging” that appeal to the pre-social and pre-cognitive senses in order to unify communities through the expression of emotion (292-3). According to Williams and Boyd, rituals also resemble works of art in their primary use of percepts and affects rather than concepts to “promote sustained interaction with the paradoxical aspect of human experience” (304). Furthermore, like works of art, rituals can act as “subtle instrument[s] for the exploration of those central concerns that the practitioner brings to his practice” (295), and some rituals can even be considered “masterworks” to which participants can return again and again to gain new and deeper spiritual insights (294). Through their use of sensory appeals and artistic strategies, therefore, rituals could provide a realm of beauty for immigrants whose environment was often grossly lacking in aesthetic appeal while also providing them with a context in which to explore their highest moral concerns.

As we have seen, the arrival of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe and the far East at the close of the nineteenth century triggered responses from Americans that subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, combined Nativism with race theories to justify restrictions on immigration. These theories, as noted in Chapter One, made morality dependent upon biology and were, in fact, largely pseudo-scientific screens behind which Anglo-American aesthetics could operate. Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great*

*Race* (1916), for example, developed an extensive anthropological basis for his essential claims that the American “Nordic” race was “of superior type, physically, intellectually, and morally” (48) because of its higher degree of specialization, and that immigrants from the “primitive races” of southern and eastern Europe were essentially a moustache on the national Mona Lisa.<sup>58</sup> Throughout the book, Grant continually derives value from pseudo-fact, arguing, for instance, that Alexander the Great’s “aquiline nose, fair skin, gently curling yellow hair and light eyes” (162) were evidence of Nordic power over the Middle East and that, since the purity of ancient Greek blood has since been tainted with Mediterranean blood, “it is chiefly among the pure Nordics of Anglo-Norman type that there occur those smooth and regular classic features, especially the brow and nose lines, that were the delight of the sculptors of Hellas” (162). Grant further bases his argument for the supremacy of the Nordic race on his observations that the gods of Olympus, Venus, and Christ himself “are always depicted as blond,” while “the two thieves who were crucified with Christ are always brunette,” going on to observe that “such quasi-authentic traditions as we have of our Lord strongly suggest his Nordic, possibly Greek, physical and moral attributes” (230).

In numerous passages, Grant also links biological aesthetics with morality in pointing out specific physical features that testify simultaneously to the aesthetic and moral supremacy of the Nordic race. He compares, for example, the “high bridge[ed] and long, narrow nose, the so-called Roman, Norman or aquiline nose, [which] is characteristic of the most highly specialized races of mankind” to “the bridgeless nose

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<sup>58</sup> Although Grant’s book was published in 1916, John Higham reports that the book became most influential after WWI when, during the 1920s, it was used to support the racist agenda of such prominent figures as Henry Ford. *Strangers in the Land*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1988) 266.

with wide, flaring nostrils” which is “everywhere of a very ancient, generalized and low character” (30). Grant foregoes any specific analysis of the Negro or Asian race, which he groups with “certain aberrant species of man,” as being beyond the scope of the book (33), but he does use evolutionary theory to align immigrants from southern and eastern Europe with the African and warns that the national physique and character will be atavistically degraded by admixture with inferior stock, singling out in particular the Polish Jew, “whose *dwarf stature, peculiar mentality, and ruthless concentration on self-interest* are being engrafted upon the stock of the nation” (16, emphasis added).

In addition to fusing aesthetics and morality, Grant also engages in a similar conflation of religion and race when he states that “Whether we like to admit it or not, the result of the mixture of two races, in the long run, gives us a race reverting to the more ancient generalized and lower type. The cross between a white man and a Negro is a Negro; the cross between a white man and a Hindu is a Hindu; and the cross between any of the three European races and a Jew is a Jew” (18). Grant views the ancient religious traditions of these groups, with their highly developed moral codes, as deleterious to the Nordic capacity to conquer. “One thing is certain,” he later warns, “in any such mixture, the surviving traits will be determined by competition between the lowest and most primitive elements and the specialized traits of Nordic man; his stature, his light colored eyes, his fair skin and light colored hair, his straight nose and his splendid fighting and moral qualities, will have little part in the resultant mixture” (92).

Grant’s concern to preserve the good and the beautiful in the Nordic American extends so far as his advocacy of the sterilization of “social failures,” a practice which he views as “a practical, merciful and inevitable solution to the whole problem” that “can be

applied to an ever widening circle of social discards, beginning always with the criminal, the diseased and the insane and extending gradually to types which may be called weaklings rather than defectives *and perhaps ultimately to worthless race types*" (51, emphasis added). In hindsight, given the events in Germany twenty years later, such statements suggest the slippery slope created by extending aesthetic standards into the questions of morality and race.

Grant envisions, then, an American socio-religious order based on the aesthetics of upper-class Anglo America, wherein a native Nordic American aristocracy "resting upon layer after later of immigrants of lower races" would control capital, education, and "the religious ideals and altruistic bias of the community" (5). Thus, for men like Grant, the fitting act in America by definition must conform to moral standards that also include a strong admixture of upper-class aesthetic standards, an attitude that was common enough among Anglo-Americans for Horace Kallen to devote considerable time to it in *Democracy Versus the Melting Pot*, published a year before Grant's book. Kallen recognized that what immigrants struggled to gain in their attempts to assimilate was not so much some quintessential *American* trait but the aesthetic standards imposed by the New England upper class upon the rest of America. Thus, Kallen, who links ethnic prejudice to class and economic injustice, argues that "Americanization" is less a matter of ethnic assimilation than of a capitalist aesthetics based upon greed which required the poor to ape the appearance and manners of the rich. "In all things," Kallen writes, "greed has set the standard, so that the working ideal of the people is to get rich, to live, and to think as the rich" (5), implicitly arguing that the "perceived points of difference" at which

Grant experienced such disgust were largely determined by class rather than ethnicity or evolution.

Into this cauldron of seething opinions regarding the aesthetic legitimacy of ethnic groups came the immigrants with their “outlandish” religious practices and their desire for acceptance. For immigrants facing aesthetic and moral prejudice of the sort Grant promulgates, the appearance of their ritual practice became problematic, for, as Jennings explains, ritual is not only a classroom for the study of the fitting act but also a performance that “communicates knowledge of the agent of the action—‘we are as we act’—to others” (123). Thus the ritual medium for conveying information regarding the moral acceptability of ethnic groups to outsiders, when it aroused disgust in Anglo-Americans, sometimes became detrimental to the ability of immigrants to gain the acceptance they so greatly desired. Some of these immigrants began to feel that the appearance of the ritual representation of their moral character needed to be rehabilitated so as not to deter their integration into mainstream society.

A clear example of this can be seen in the case of Jewish immigrants, who had a long history of being constructed by Gentiles as unaesthetic, beginning with their bodies, which, as we have seen, were considered to be misshapen, weak, and diseased. However, unlike the Italians and some other immigrant groups who were also perceived as aesthetically deficient, the Jews had no ancient treasure house of beautiful artifacts to which they could point in defense of their aesthetic worth. As the heirs of a religious tradition that with the Second Commandment forbade the use of images to express their religious sensibilities, the Jews were historically dissociated from painting and sculpture, as they were known in the West. Their reverence for language produced a great body of

poetry, mostly religious, but, as was established in the previous chapter, Jewish language itself was never accepted by non-Jews as an aesthetic medium.

In fact, in the nineteenth century, Jewish language became expressly identified in Europe with biological race theories that argued against the Jew's capacity to create anything of true beauty (Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred* 209). For example, during a quarrel with the Franco-Jewish composer Giacomo Meyerbeer, Richard Wagner wrote an influential essay entitled "Jews in Music" in which he argued that the sound of Jewish speech, which is always that of a foreigner speaking a language not his own, prevents the Jew from ever producing true poetry or music: "In this Speech, this Art," wrote Wagner, "the Jew can only mimic and mock—not truly make a poem of his words, an artwork of his doings" (qtd. 210). Many anti-Semitic writers, such as Eugene Düring, focused their attacks on the Jewish poet Heinrich Heine as the symbol of the Jew who, "lacking any free and selfless activity of the spirit which alone can lead to disinterested truth and beauty," merely poses as an artist as a means to infiltrate and pollute the purity of German culture (212). And in *Sex and Character* (1903), a book that influenced Sigmund Freud, Otto Weininger places Jewish aesthetic perception in the same category as that of women, both groups having a flawed psychology that results in a shallow ability to perceive or express the beautiful (Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred* 246).

As we have seen, these perceptions of the Jew as aesthetically deficient spilled over into controversies about religious ritual. Indeed, an anxiety over its lack of conformity to Western aesthetic standards was the chief catalyst for the radical revision of Jewish ritual by the Reform movement, which began in Germany among Westernized Jews who saw the aesthetics of their religious practice as interfering with their ability to

assimilate into German society. Thus, they wished to “dignify” their form of worship, to make it “decorous” (Glazer 27). According to Nathan Glazer, Westernized Jews were embarrassed by the traditional Jewish service, which they viewed as “a rather cacophonous Hebrew outpouring by the congregation, dressed in hats and prayer shawls, and led by a cantor, [. . .] using a decidedly un-Western and un-Germanic mode of singing, or rather chanting” (27). Major steps were taken, therefore, to impose Western European aesthetic patterns upon a religious practice they now viewed as formless and chaotic, including the introduction of organized seating, choirs, organs, congregational hymns, and a more elaborate and formal order of worship (27).

Yet, Irving Howe makes an important point about the Jews and their God that is especially significant for the novels of Jewish immigrant writers:

He was not a God of magnificence; nor was he an aesthetic God. The Jews had no beautiful churches; they had wooden synagogues. *Beauty was a quality, not a form; a content, not an arrangement. The Jews would have been deeply puzzled by the idea that the aesthetic and the moral are distinct realms.* One spoke not of a beautiful thing, but of a beautiful deed. Only later did Jewish intellectuals discover that, even in the usual Western terms, there was an innocent beauty in Jewish liturgical music, the carving of the Holy arks, the embroidery of prayer shawls, the calligraphy of the Holy Scripts. But where *intellectuals saw these as objects or qualities to be isolated for aesthetic inspection*, their ancestors had seen them as integral elements in the cultivation of God’s Word. (11, emphasis added)

This emphasis on righteousness gave dignity and meaning to Jews whom outsiders viewed as incapable of aesthetic beauty both in their form or expression. While

many non-Jews were describing Jewish Messianic expectations as dislocating them from the loveliness of the real world (Gilman, *Jewish Self Hatred* 214), the Jewish emphasis on moral beauty springing from such expectations served them as a spiritual and ethnic refuge. For some Jews, however, who had absorbed European and American culture and who sought to rehabilitate the image of the Jew in non-Jewish eyes, this insistence on moral beauty over aesthetic beauty could be a source of pain and embarrassment. Indeed, the conflict between the historic Jewish emphasis on moral beauty and the new emphasis on aesthetic beauty Jews encountered in the American marketplace informs many of the novels written by Jewish immigrant writers during the early decades of the twentieth century. Two Jewish novels in particular—Edward Steiner’s *The Mediator* and Anzia Yeziarska’s *Bread Givers*—are especially revealing examples of the ways Jewish writers used ritual to depict Jewish ambivalence and confusion regarding the relationship of their own tradition to Gentile aesthetic and moral codes.

Steiner, we will recall, was a Jewish convert to Christianity who advocated Tolstoyan socialism and published several books, such as *The Immigrant Tide*, in which he subjected the bodies and habits of his own ethnic group to American standards of aesthetic taste, comparing pictures of Jewish features of the “poorer” and “finer” types. Steiner’s novel indicates that part of his reason for converting to Christianity may have arisen out of an especially intense form of the same need to conform to European standards of beauty that prompted the Reform movement’s emphasis on aesthetic decorum in Jewish ritual. His story of Samuel Cohen, the Jewish apostate who becomes a Christian monk, centers on the power of ritual aesthetics as the impetus behind Samuel’s



conversion. Samuel, the last in a line of Jewish priests, and therefore responsible for carrying on ritual practice in the synagogue, has been brought up by his widowed father and his Catholic nanny Suzska in the Polish town of Kottowin, which he describes as “still Medieval,” a pre-modern society in which aesthetics, ethics, and epistemology were inseparable from the needs of the social order.

Samuel, who feels oppressed by his father’s scrupulous observance of Jewish ritual, takes great pleasure in his yearly visits to Suzska’s village at Easter. After taking part in the Passover ritual, which, we are told, “oppressed him” (44), Samuel journeys for a visit to Suzska’s house. On the way, he crosses the estate of a Polish nobleman, where, overcome with awe at the beauty of a lilac bush, he breaks a sprig to take with him. The Polish nobleman catches Samuel and abuses him physically and verbally. His anti-Semitic insults scar Samuel’s soul, making him perceive himself as something ugly (46), a perception that sparks an already latent desire for beauty and social acceptance in Samuel that will burst into flame when he witnesses Catholic ritual for the first time and is captivated by the aesthetic power of the Easter Mass and its appeal to the senses:

[T]he ornately adorned altar, the lamps, acolytes walking up and down altar steps, the tinkling of bells, the sonorous voice of the priest, the deep vibrating tones of the organ; it fairly overwhelmed the boy and the strange Latin phrases so musical and resonant, wooed him with a prophetic promise that some day, he too, would speak them over throngs of waiting people. (47-48)

Here, the sensory appeals and formalized movements of Catholic ritual draw Samuel over a forbidden boundary as he crosses the threshold into the Christian church, where the participants look at the Jewish boy in their midst with astonishment, “not

knowing nor caring that he was a kinsman of Him whose Resurrection filled them with gladness” (47). That night Samuel goes to bed dreaming of acolytes walking up and down altar steps, and, from that day forward, he is no longer content with the religious practice of his own faith. Samuel perceives the beauty of Christian ritual as the sign of Christian love, which he also experiences in his relationship with the kindly priest Father Antonius. In a short time, Samuel transfers his conception of moral beauty from faithful adherence to Jewish law to the new brotherhood symbolized by the beautiful devotions of the Catholic Church.

At the same time that he is staggered by his experience of beauty in Catholic religious practice, Samuel is exposed for the first time to Western ideas and art as the Czar initiates Jewish attendance at public schools as part of his project for ethnic cleansing through education. Samuel begins secretly reading novels and poetry that, like the Catholic mass, act as a means of gratifying his aesthetic sensibilities. His father is adamantly opposed to Samuel’s interest in any kind of Western learning or art, which, as the province of Gentiles, he sees as detrimental to his son’s moral integrity.

On another visit to Suzska’s village, Samuel again experiences relief and delight in his observance of the Catholic Mass, which temporarily liberates him from a home life he perceives as ugly:

He quickly forgot the Jews’ street, with its mud, its open sewers and their smells, and even the Talmud lessons, with their entanglement of wisdom and folly. He felt himself transported into another world (83)

The priest in his gorgeous vestments sang vespers, the congregation and the choir joining in heartily; the sights and sounds soon enraptured the sensitive lad. The

orderly service, the beauty and harmony of it all, were so different from the disorderly synagogue service, that every sound and every movement were a distinct pleasure to him. (85)

At this point in the novel, Samuel's response to Catholic ritual indicates his increasing identification with Christianity, as he looks back upon the ritual practice of his own ethnic group and feels disgust at its difference from the artistry he finds in Catholic worship. When Father Antonius preaches about Christian love during the service, Samuel's conflation of moral and aesthetic beauty in his experience of Christian ritual practice culminates in his entry into the monastery and his abandonment of his faith and his father. At the rite of initiation into the novitiate, Steiner tells us, "Silence, deep silence, hovered over all, as prostrate upon the floor, before the prior, Samuel lay in submission, his young impressionable soul enraptured by the magic of the service; all the human in him benumbed, and all the divine aflame" (91). The artistic strategies of Catholic ritual have succeeded in seducing Samuel away from his own religious heritage in the hope that Christians indeed "are as they act."

Fourteen years later, the young monk, now also a priest, will celebrate his first communion, touching off the bloody pogrom that will reveal to him the naiveté of his belief, as Christians slaughter Jews at random in the streets. Samuel Cohen's attempt to appropriate the ritual beauty of Gentile hegemony, like his plucking the nobleman's lilac, brings down the violence of anti-Semitic feeling upon the Jew. After being helped by his friend Dr. Roznik to get passage to America, Samuel meets a cross section of immigrant types on the voyage, including Zionists, Socialists, and Anarchists, all of whom argue about the relationship of religion to the order of political and economic power in the

world. He also meets a wealthy American family, the Bruces, who, out of their professed love for Jews, devote themselves to converting them to Christianity. Once in America, Samuel experiences the grim life of American workers under the lash of economic exploitation in a sweatshop, making beautiful clothing for those who can afford it, trying now to forget the God of hypocritical and cruel Christians but still longing for the beauty of the religious life.

When his friend Rivka is seriously injured, Samuel goes to the Catholic hospital to watch over her. Passing by the chapel, he realizes it is Easter when he sees the nuns celebrating Easter Mass. In a significant passage, Samuel is drawn by the smell of incense:

[F]ollowing it to the chapel below, [he] stood by the open door, looking longingly in at the officiating priest, who was elevating the Host. Like a flash, there came to him the vision of an Easter day in the long ago, when he had stood beside the open door of the chapel in Kunova, watching Father Antonius with longing eyes [. . .] Unnoticed, he stole into the chapel and fell upon his knees. The nuns had prostrated themselves in adoration before the uplifted Host; incense and chloroform mingled in the air, soothing Samuel's overtaxed nerves. He sank into a wearied stupor. (228)

The ritual order still entrances Samuel through its use of aesthetics, but Steiner makes clear the politico-religious dangers of Samuel's torpor, brought on by the combined effects of incense and chloroform, in a statement made by the religious skeptic Dr. Roznik, who by now has also immigrated to America: "With incense the Church has amputated the heads of humanity and with chloroform she amputates its legs. She saves

the belly” (222). Roznik’s observation carries the implication that ritual is a tool of a system of power that, like a mad physician, drugs the masses through its sensual appeal, leaving them hungry yet unable to discern or defend themselves against the moral depravity of the system in which they live. Ironically, Roznik depicts the church as using aesthetics to induce moral *anaesthesia*.

Samuel remains torn between his aesthetic and his moral senses, between his love for the beauty of ecclesiastical ritual and his outrage at the moral depravity of Christians in their treatment of Jews. Later, Dr. Roznik, with characteristic bluntness mingled with anti-Semitic prejudice toward the aesthetics of Jewish ritual practice, sums it up even more clearly when he explains Samuel’s dilemma to Jane Bruce:

Samuel was born with all that hunger for beauty and love—born into Judaism, which is hopelessly ugly. An orthodox Jewish synagogue, Fräulein, is as ugly as a barn, and its prayers are a babel of sounds. Well, he looked into a Roman Catholic church once, and presto, change. He was converted, because there was music that went to his soul, pictures that delighted his eyes, and a priest who talked of Love. (253)

Samuel eventually manages to give up his delight in the aesthetic pleasure of Catholic ritual in favor of a religious socialism that redefines the fitting act as social activism for justice within the capitalist system rather than ritual practice. When a Dominican priest comes to Samuel demanding that he return to his priestly duties or else be excommunicated and deprived of the salvific power of Catholic rites, Samuel turns the priest out, declaring that he is no longer a Christian but a Jew who will preach to the Jews about Christ, their Messiah. From then on, Samuel will mediate between the two faiths

from a place that transcends the ritual practices of either side, reading Tolstoy, working in the ghetto among the poor, and engaging in a bread-and-butter evangelism that witnesses to Christ as Love through the alleviation of suffering. He is now labeled an atheist and an anarchist because he no longer fits into accepted models of Christians and Jews. In a manner reminiscent of Lawrence Sterner's *The Unchristian Jew*, socialist ethics now replace Jewish and Christian ritual as the true religious praxis, and the aesthetics of Catholic ritual come to symbolize the morally questionable capital, both economic and cultural, of the ruling class, which both Jews and Gentiles should eschew in favor of the plainer but more authentic ethics of Tolstoy. Steiner here depicts ritual as functioning much like Eagleton's description of the capitalist realm of the aesthetic— as an imaginary utopian realm in which human beings can experience the reunification of their abilities and the beauty of a redeemed social order without having to restructure society according to its vision. Thus Steiner brings to our attention the problem of aesthetics in ritual: On one hand its beauty can satisfy the soul and move it toward moral action, while on the other hand its aesthetic power can also be used by the ruling class to militate against the realization of the fitting act of establishing justice in society at large.

Like Steiner's novel, the fiction of Anzia Yezierska repeatedly depicts the Jewish immigrant's attempts to negotiate the proper relationship between aesthetic and moral beauty within an unjust socio-economic order. In "The Lost 'Beautifulness,'" for example, Jewish immigrant Hanneh Hayyeh's desperate attempt to introduce a small element of beauty into her surroundings through the simple act of painting her kitchen leads to her eviction by a capitalist system that requires that she now pay more than she can afford for an apartment she has beautified through her own hard labor. More tragic,

however, is her loss of faith in the moral beauty of her upper-class employer Mrs.

Preston and in America as a country in which friendships are not determined by money or class. “The Fat of the Land,” in turn, relates the tragedy of Hanneh Breineh, a Jewish mother from the Lower East Side, whose children make good only to find her no longer aesthetically fit for their affluent friends and neighborhood. “The Free Vacation House” describes the humiliation endured by a poor Jewish immigrant woman who is treated to a charity weekend at a lovely house in the country only to be shunted to the back of the vacation lodge out of sight of upper-class visitors who might be disturbed by her appearance. Finally, her novel *Salome of the Tenements* recounts the obsessive quest for beauty by a young immigrant woman whose religious sensibilities have been redirected away from Judaism toward a passionate devotion to aesthetics in her love for beautiful clothing and her genteel Anglo-American husband. While she does not view Western aesthetics as the insidious drug that Steiner does, Yeziarska also champions the Jew’s need for beauty and recognizes the harm that results from sequestering the beautiful behind walls erected by class and ethnicity.

Yeziarska recognized her own need for beauty, which she elevated even above her need for love, in the following poem:

All my life I’ve let go all for the fleeting rainbow gleam

Of beauty

My hands are empty.

My house is bare.

I stand alone in the dimming memories of vanished loves,

But in me I felt [them] beating still—

. . . I have spent love—and bought beauty. (qtd. in Henriksen 67-8)

Yet, she had also directly experienced Anglo-American prejudice toward the “unaesthetic Jew” in her attempts to become a teacher in the public schools. Yezierska was often criticized by her superiors for being loud and overbearing in her behavior and unkempt and slovenly in her appearance (18-19). She longed to emulate the standards of public dress and decorum exemplified by the upper-class Anglo-American of the Northeast and held a life-long fascination for the fine clothing and proper behavior of women to whom these seemed to come naturally (233-4). A controversy over the aesthetics of her personal appearance with regard to a job in the public schools, in fact, caused her to appeal for help to philosopher, psychologist, and educational theorist John Dewey, who was then held in great esteem for his recent book *Democracy and Education* and for his devotion to fairness in the American education system (86).<sup>59</sup> Yezierska’s brief but profound connection with Dewey was one of the most significant in her life, one that spurred her seriously to pursue her writing career.

In John Dewey, the New England Brahmin, Yezierska found a spiritual partner and mentor from whom she could glean the wisdom she felt she needed to understand and gain entrance into Anglo-American culture. During the early months of 1918, Dewey invited Yezierska to audit his seminar on social and educational philosophy at Columbia University, which was also attended by wealthy businessman, scientist, and art collector Albert C. Barnes and Margaret Frances Bradshaw, who later published an important book

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<sup>59</sup> Yezierska’s daughter and biographer Louise Henriksen reports that Yezierska went to Dewey directly, claiming that she was being denied a teaching position even though she held a degree from Columbia University because she was “a non-Anglo-Saxon, an immigrant with not-so-neat ways” (88). Henriksen also claims that during the interview Yezierska’s disheveled appearance was part of the unconventional charm that attracted Dewey to her. *Anzia Yezierska: A Writer’s Life*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1988) 88.



on aesthetics. Barnes and Dewey engaged in a long-term and reciprocally influential discussion on aesthetics beginning at this time and continuing at least until Dewey published *Art as Experience* (1934), his major work on aesthetics, in which he acknowledged his indebtedness to Barnes. Barnes, in turn, dedicated *The Art in Painting* to Dewey (Shusterman 105). It is possible, since their friendship was blossoming at that time, that Dewey and Barnes discussed their ideas in some form at the seminar and that Yeziarska absorbed some of their discussion while auditing it. *Bread Givers* was published in 1925, the same year that Dewey published *Experience and Nature* in which he first addressed the subject of aesthetics at length. It is arguable that the novel shows the influence of Dewey's ideal of moving the aesthetic out of what he called "the beauty parlor of civilization" and into the daily experience of ordinary people in its insistence upon the necessity of beauty to the lives of poor immigrants. Like Dewey, Yeziarska suggests that through its enrichment of the global experience of human beings, aesthetics should serve to enhance the human capacity for the moral life, regardless of class and ethnicity (99).

*Bread Givers* is driven by repeated conflicts over the proper relationship between the beautiful and the ethical, the most important of which centers in the complex character of Reb Smolinsky, the immigrant father of four daughters. In accord with Jewish custom, and despite the fact that the family can barely meet its most basic needs, Reb Smolinsky refuses to work so that he can devote himself to the reading and study of the Torah. His choice of the spiritual over the material springs from a Jewish spirituality similar to that described by Howe, in which beauty is located in morality. Reb Smolinsky feels it is right for his wife and daughters to support him because "[t]he whole world

would be in thick darkness if not for men like me who give their lives to spread the light of the Holy Torah” (24). But, in Yezierska’s presentation, the ruthless economic order in which the family lives makes Reb Smolinsky’s apparent pursuit of moral beauty no longer a matter of adherence to religious tradition but a matter of self-indulgence, one that deprives his family not only of the physical comfort of food and warmth but also of the spiritual sustenance to be obtained through an occasional glimpse of the beautiful.

Yezierska presents us with an immigrant family blighted by the ugliness of its environment and repeatedly returns in the details to the ugliness of the Smolinskys’ surroundings—the dark airshaft hole, the fly dirt on the kitchen light, the foul bedding and rags, the kitchen table with uneven legs, the dirty dishes in the sink— as well as the family’s feeble attempts at beautification by means of a new oilcloth and flowers for the table or a scrap of lace curtain to cover up the rusty pipes. She also demonstrates that, though they were poor, the Smolinskys had a great capacity for aesthetic appreciation in their love of the natural beauty of Poland and the lovely handmade needlework they left behind, replaced now in America by factory-made goods (30). Mrs. Smolinsky recalls her emotional connection to the beauty of the Sabbath tablecloth she had created herself, sadly observing, “In America, rich people can only buy, and buy things made by machines. Even Rockefeller’s daughter got only store-bought, ready-made things for her dowry. There was a feeling in my tablecloth” (33). In her portrait of the Smolinsky family, Yezierska thus works against prevailing stereotypes of the Jew as incapable of artistic appreciation and therefore immune to the absence of beauty in the ghetto by showing that such ugliness was in fact hurtful to a people for whom beauty was a necessary ingredient of their sense of well-being.

In order to reconstruct the Jew as capable of aesthetic sensitivity, however, Yeziarska, like Steiner, resorts to some of the very anti-Semitic attitudes regarding the unaesthetic Jew that she seeks to subvert, particularly with regard to Jewish religion, which she continually depicts as indifferent or even hostile to aesthetics and an impediment to women's access to the beautiful. Although the family in its impoverishment is cut off from most forms of aesthetic pleasure, two of the daughters fall in love with men who genuinely love them and could easily provide them with ongoing connections to beauty. Jacob Novak, a wealthy pianist, courts Masha, but because he places aesthetic over moral beauty by playing the piano on the Sabbath, Reb Smolinsky turns him away. Morris Lipkin, a poet, is in love with Fania, but because he has no money, Reb Smolinsky will not consider the match for fear that his daughter will not have enough money to support his Torah study. Thus Reb Smolinsky is a troublesome combination of devotion to spiritual values and a rigid adherence to collective moral codes that make him oblivious to the emotional and aesthetic needs of his daughters. In his blind pursuit of moral beauty as defined by his patriarchal religion, he injures his own children and stunts their lives. In his determination to marry his daughters off to rich men, Reb Smolinsky's devotion to the spiritual becomes indistinguishable from the grab for money in the marketplace.

The sins of their father's confusion regarding moral and aesthetic beauty are, in turn, visited upon his children. The oldest daughter Bessie, "the Burden Bearer," who has no physical beauty, remains allegiant to the traditional patriarchal model of female moral beauty through self-abnegation by giving up the suitor she wants and marrying her father's choice, Zalmon the fishmonger, the widowed father of a houseful of children,

only because she feels compassion for his motherless son Bennie. Her refusal to act on her own behalf results in succeeding years spent in ugliness and misery and the forfeit of her own unique experience of life. Sara's sister Masha lives at the other extreme, devoting all of her time in the beginning to a mirror-gazing narcissism that requires total absorption in her own aesthetic appeal. Instead of giving her earnings to the family for its survival, she spends it on small bits of finery in imitation of the commodified images of feminine beauty she sees in the newspapers and magazines (3). In the latter part of the novel, however, Masha, now married to hardship and a man she abhors, loses her exterior charms but gains in moral beauty according to traditional Jewish standards as she sacrifices her personal happiness on behalf of her children. Fania, in following her father's choice of husbands, ends up the most financially successful and has the most aesthetically pleasing life of any of the daughters, but her life is devoid of moral beauty since she is now married to a gambler who provides a life empty of spiritual values.

Yeziarska's portraits of her selfless characters indicate that she will no longer accept the total sacrifice of the aesthetic to the moral required of women by patriarchal religion. Instead, she seeks to redefine the relationship of moral to aesthetic beauty in the lives of women. She clearly shows that the self-injury of the older daughters in capitulating to their father's demands is morally wrong through her positive portrayal of the youngest daughter Sara. For Sara, a pursuit of moral beauty that indulges in easy self-abnegation and fails to shape consciously a unified and meaningful experience for the self that includes some experience of the beautiful is not enough. Unlike her older sisters, Sara engages in an aesthetic project of self-creation that will entail finding a way to enrich her experience by interweaving the aesthetic and the moral in her life. In Sara,

Yeziarska rehabilitates the image of the Jewish woman as a figure that is both capable and needful of aesthetic experience.

When she finally becomes unable to tolerate her father's manipulation of the family to suit his own needs, Sara leaves home and puts herself through college in order to become a teacher, working long hours in a laundry in addition to time spent in study. During these arduous years, Sara continually admires the women she sees whose dress and demeanor suggest the understated elegance of the upper class, something in which she feels she is lacking. Yet, it is her brash and outspoken behavior, largely at odds with the aesthetic codes of upper-class Anglo-Americans, which enables her to break out of many of the strictures imposed by her religion, her gender, her ethnicity, and her class. Nevertheless, Sara continues to hold Anglo-American aesthetic standards up to herself as models of "a person" (237). When, at last, a college graduate and recipient of a \$1,000 award for her writing, she returns to New York on the train to seek a job as a teacher, contrasting her now cool and subdued deportment favorably with her former immigrant clumsiness when she first rode the train to college (237). Back in New York, she selects an entirely new wardrobe of clothing, delighting in her ability to choose the finest fabrics and to reflect her hard won moral integrity in the aesthetic beauty of her outward appearance. She finds an apartment notable for its simplicity and classic elegance. Finally, she sits alone in her new home and quietly revels in the aesthetic pleasure of the symbols of her moral achievement, observing, "I, Sara Smolinsky, had done what I set out to do," adding that "this simplicity was rich and fragrant with unutterable beauty" (241).

Sara's new identity, forged from her spiritual, physical, and emotional struggle, has now come to rest symbolically in the aesthetic power of her clothing. Hence, it becomes the central focus of the climactic scene in the novel, the funeral for her mother at which she is obligated to observe the ritual tearing of the clothes prescribed by Jewish law as a symbolic gesture of grief for a woman who sacrificed much for her and whom she was forced to abandon in order to escape her father's tyranny. The funeral ritual thus becomes a moment of crisis at which Sara must choose between a collective idea of morality encoded in a ritual act that destroys aesthetic beauty and her newly created ethico-aesthetic order:

The undertaker, with a knife in his hand, cut into Father's coat and he rent his garments according to the Biblical law and ages of tradition. Then he slit my sisters' waists, and they, too, did as Father had done. Then the man turned to me with the knife in his hand. "No," I cried. "I feel terrible enough without tearing my clothes."

"It has to be done."

"I don't believe in this. It's my only suit, and I need it for work. Tearing it wouldn't bring Mother back to life again."

A hundred eyes burned on me their condemnation.

"Look at her, the *Americanerin!*" (255)

The scene recalls Maurice Bloch's theory, discussed in Chapter Three, that the formality of the ritual setting makes difficult any refusal of the obligatory gesture. But refuse it Sara does. The ritual context, which demands allegiance to patriarchal concepts of which actions are to be considered fitting, places Sara in a double bind: she must either

conform, in which case the act would not be fitting for her, or to rebel, in which case the act would not be fitting for those who uphold the ritual order. When we recall Jennings's recognition of the underlying aesthetic implications of the ritual pursuit of the fitting act, Sara's refusal seems to arise not from simple vanity or a superficial concern with outward beauty, although her companions try to represent it as such; her refusal to perform the ritual act of self-harm at the request of the male undertaker symbolizes instead her redefinition of the fitting act through adherence to a feminist aesthetics that refuses to sacrifice itself to the patriarchal order. Instead, she chooses to preserve the beauty of her new garments so that she can continue to work and provide for herself, which, in turn, will enable her to fashion her life as she chooses.

In refusing to tear her clothes, Sara rejects the old understanding of the fitting act as it was embodied in the rituals of the "unaesthetic Jew." She insists instead upon aesthetic experience as a legitimate experience in its own right and a woman's right and obligation to shape herself and her life consciously, according to her own inner law, rather than the laws imposed upon her by patriarchal religion. In presenting such a choice within the ritual context, Yezierska dramatically encapsulates the tensions faced by Jews who were entranced by Anglo-American aesthetic standards even as they engaged in a religious practice deemed unaesthetic by those very standards. For many Jews, like Yezierska's protagonist, this meant a similar choice between allegiance to traditional Jewish codes of moral beauty that divided them from mainstream society and the embrace of a secular aesthetics that divided them from their religious heritage. Yezierska also portrays the burden such conflicting understandings of beauty placed on immigrant women who were perceived by men like Weininger as flawed vessels of aesthetic

perception even as they were also expected to conform to both upper-class standards of beauty and those continually churned out by the capitalist engine of consumption.

In choosing to dishonor her mother according to the collective values enacted in the ritual, Sara seeks to honor her through what she perceives to be her own independence and integrity; but that very integrity, as Kallen and Eagleton point out, is symbolically manifested through aesthetic standards imposed by a ruling class indifferent to the needs of Yezierska's community. Sara's self-fashioning echoes the defiant existential aesthetics of Nietzsche in the individual's overthrow of Jewish patriarchy's "Thou Shalt"; but it also conforms to the aestheticizing of subjectivity Eagleton claims was the project of capitalism and confirms the assumptions and standards set up by Anglo-American patriarchy to evaluate women and other ethnicities. Sara sharply criticizes the loud clothing of the newly rich immigrant Jew, for example (73), and is very careful not to choose clothing for herself that could be considered gaudy, but instead chooses quietly dignified clothing of expensive material and classic lines (239). She modulates her voice from the peddler's *fortissimo* to the debutante's *sotto voce* in imitation of the refined young American women she observes in college. Only after she acquires the "cool voice," "the quiet stillness of a college lady," and other aesthetic qualities deemed acceptable by the upper-class Anglo-American male does she state "Sara Smolinsky, from Hester Street, changed into a person!" (237). However, although she celebrates the beauty of her now culturally acceptable voice and manners, the language and tone in which she celebrates them are those of her *old* Hester Street voice, indicating that her newly acquired means of expression is not entirely her own. Hence, Yezierska implicitly supports on an individual level what Kallen complained of regarding



immigrant life in general—that “personhood” in America is an aesthetic construction the behavior stemming from which must inevitably conform to upper-class American norms.

Sara’s acquisition of elegant manners and quiet self-control also suggests an aesthetics of the fitting act that bears a strong resemblance to the personal example and preferences of the refined and reserved John Dewey, who was noted for his friendships with passionate types like Yezierska (Henricksen 85). Dewey expresses his preference for balance, decorum, and self-control in his understanding of the aesthetics of the fitting act in the following passage from *Art as Experience*:

There is an element of passion in all esthetic perception. Yet when we are overwhelmed by passion, as in extreme rage, fear, jealousy, the experience is definitely non-esthetic [. . . ] Consequently, the material for the experience lacks elements of balance and proportion. For these can be present only when, as in the conduct that has grace or dignity, the act is controlled by an exquisite sense of the relations which the act sustains—its fitness to the occasion and to the situation.

(337)

Although he was devoted to improving the lives of the common people, Dewey could not help embodying for Yezierska the styles and tastes of the Anglo-American aristocracy whom Madison Grant supported and Horace Kallen repudiated as the moral and aesthetic ruling class. In his theoretical discourse and in exemplifying for Yezierska the qualities of American good taste, therefore, Dewey may have contributed not only to the novel’s insistence upon the necessary interplay of the beautiful and the good in the lives of poor immigrants but also to its celebration of the aesthetic standards of New

England. Yezierska sought to rehabilitate the image of the “unaesthetic Jew,” but as a result of her exposure to the gatekeepers of the American temple of culture, she accepted, as Steiner did, at least some of the terms imposed by the stereotype itself— namely, that Orthodox Jewish ritual, with its refusal to capitulate to American aesthetic standards, was not only hopelessly ugly but undermined the capacities of its practitioners to embrace the beautiful.

An entirely different perspective on American aesthetics and morality, and their relationship to the ritual practice of immigrant groups, can be seen in the works of Korean writer Younghill Kang, who arrived in the United States at the age of eighteen in 1921, just before immigration restrictions made it impossible for Asians to enter. Born in a remote village in Northern Korea, Kang was the son of a Confucian scholar and received a thorough training in the classics of Chinese philosophy (Choy 281) only to be thrust out of the nest of Korean culture by Japan’s annexation of Korea, the influx of missionaries who brought opportunities for Western learning, and his own impulse toward individualism. After refusing to accept the duties of early marriage and ritual observance expected of the eldest son, Kang left his family and went to Seoul, where he studied for several years before the political climate and his own desires to go to the West became too intense for him to remain any longer. With the help of American missionaries, Kang emigrated and studied first in Canada and then at Harvard. He later taught comparative literature at NYU, worked for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the ACLU, and finally became a noted lecturer around the United States, voicing strong opposition to the practices of the McCarthy Era (283). Kang was a close friend of author Thomas Wolfe, who introduced him to a publisher from whom Kang received a contract

to publish his autobiographical novel *The Grass Roof* in 1931 (Kim 286, n.20). Its sequel *East Goes West* was published in 1937.

Kang's novels depict the misunderstanding and prejudice endured by Koreans who received a great deal of abuse at the hands of Americans who not only discriminated against them because they were Asian but also continually mistook them for Chinese or Japanese (Kim 4). The time at which Kang arrived in the U.S. was a particularly tense period in the long history of American Sinophobia. Anti-Asian feelings in America had begun as far back as 1850 when small numbers of Chinese immigrants began arriving in California, and, even though there were never more than 10,000 Koreans in the United States before 1945, they continually experienced American hostility toward Asians, particularly after 1900 when the "Yellow Peril" scare moved across the country from California, and when it became common for Koreans to be refused service in restaurants and barbershops. In 1906, the San Francisco School Board decided that American-born students of Korean ancestry must be removed from white schools and made to attend Oriental schools with the Chinese, and in 1913 the California State legislature passed the Webb-Heney Land Law, which prevented Koreans, along with Chinese and Japanese, from buying any type of real estate (Choy 107).<sup>60</sup>

Such attitudes were not only the province of small business owners, rural farmers, and educators. Elaine Kim reports that pulp fiction and dime romances as well as mainstream American fiction contributed to a general fear of Asians. Lois Swinehart's

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<sup>60</sup> A particularly tense moment occurred during this period when white farmers attacked Korean orange pickers who were legally camped on the property of Mary E. Steward with stones and rocks and threatened to kill them. Arming her employees with guns, Mrs. Steward told them to shoot if they were attacked. White farmers demanded that she fire the Koreans immediately, but Mrs. Steward remained firm, declaring the Koreans to be "hard-working, diligent and honest people who are struggling for a decent life" (Choy 109).

novel *Sarangie: A Child of Chosen* (1926), for example, portrays impoverished, primitive, and superstitious Koreans who are victims of the greedy aristocrats who rule them (Kim 16). And Jack London's *Star Rover* (1915) recounts the tale of a shipwrecked British seafarer in Korea who encounters ignorance, cowardice, and sadism among the people there (7). According to London, Western civilization was seriously threatened by the possible influx of cruel and cunning Koreans under the leadership of the occupying Japanese, who had learned to use technology through their exposure to the ingenuity of Western minds (8). As Kim observes, in literature written by Anglo-Americans, the Oriental was thus most often used as a foil to indicate what the American was *not* (4). His stereotype was usually that of the cruel and crafty villain, born with a cool logic but without compassion, or that of the cowardly, effeminate, servile, and helpless supplicant in need of Western aid (8). American fiction made especial use of the language of Asians, which it frequently depicted as cacophonous, and their struggle with the English language as stock comic devices (8).

American fears of Asians again linked physical appearance to morality, manifesting in disgust at Asian bodies as the sign of moral corruption. Beginning as early as 1784, America had had a tradition of constructing the Oriental body as an oddity through museum displays, beginning with Peale's Museum in Philadelphia, which featured such curiosities as the bindings used for the feet of Chinese women, and culminating with P.T. Barnum's American Museum in New York, which, in the mid-nineteenth century, housed the (in)famous "Siamese Twins" Chang and Eng billed as Oriental anomalies (Tyner 31). As more and more Chinese immigrants arrived, attitudes of curiosity regarding a mysterious and faraway place gave way to more sinister

appraisals of the Oriental as a member of an inferior and degraded race that was biologically incapable of understanding democracy (32). In the late nineteenth century, as evolutionary race theories mingled with nativist fears intensified by reports of Asian prostitution, much of the controversy about the Asian body focused on its ugliness, dirt, and immorality, and female Asian bodies were banned from entry into the United States in order to protect Anglo-American boys from corruption and disease (41). Germ theory was also used to suggest that Asian bodies carried particular diseases to which other races were not immune (42). White American officials sought publicly to defend the Anglo-Saxon race against Asian assaults on its innate morality and aesthetic beauty. Thus, Dr. Arthur Stout, author of *Chinese Immigration and the Physiological Causes of the Decay of the Nation*, wrote “To the Caucasian race, with its varied types, has been assigned the supremacy in elevation of mind and beauty of form over all mankind [. . . ;] by commingling with Asiatics, we are creating *degenerate hybrids*” (qtd. 42).

Discourse regarding the immorality, impurity, and ugliness of Asian bodies and behavior extended to include the rituals of Chinese worship, which were also often looked upon as both ugly and indicative of heathen immorality. For ten years in the California Senate, for example, Representative Horace F. Page engaged in repeated diatribes against the Chinese, linking their ritual practice with the sexual taint of prostitution when he declared that “Their [Chinese immigrants’] moral obliquity is such that they can give no reason why they should not bring their women here for prostitution [. . .] and practice their heathenism in our very midst” (qtd. 36). In California, a local judge in speaking of the rites of Korean ancestor worship called Koreans “immoral and

religious fanatics” (Choy 107). Even the relatively sympathetic Jacob Riis calls Asian ritual practice “senseless idolatry, mere grub-worship” (*How the Other Half Lives* 63).

Asian religious rituals were first presented to the United States by *Asian* writers in a series of books written by young men from various countries and published by the D. Lothrop Publishing company beginning in 1887 with *When I Was a Boy in China*, written by Lee Yan Phou. One of the last books of the series was entitled *When I was a Boy in Korea*, written by New Il-Han, published in 1928, just three years before Kang published *The Grass Roof*. Both Lee Yan Phou and New Il-Han sought to act as mediators and good will ambassadors who, though native to China and Korea, presented their customs and religious rituals in accord with Western bias. New Il-Han, for example, who came to the United States under the auspices of Christian missionaries, attempts an almost anthropological study of his own people but also presents Korean rituals through Christian eyes, sometimes describing them as curiosities born of the superstition of the unenlightened heathen (New 159).

Kang’s autobiographical diptych, then, while also serving partially as cultural mediator, was the first to present Korean rituals unapologetically, not as objects of revulsion, curiosity, or pity but as having beauty in their own right, aesthetic creations that enacted and maintained the cultural integrity of an ancient civilization devoted to living out beauty and goodness within a harmonious social order enriched by the interaction of Confucianism with Buddhism and Taoism. In *The Grass Roof*, Kang shows us the ritual patterns that merged aesthetics with morality to create an idyllic Korean pastoral existence. *East Goes West* goes on to present the tragic plight of Asians caught in

the West without those sustaining moral and aesthetic ritual forms and their alienation in a modern world where all collective patterns have become suspect.

*The Grass Roof* creates the lost world of Korea and a family of Confucian scholars and poets through the eyes of young Chungpa Han, Kang's alter ego, who grows up viewing the world through the lens of Confucian aesthetic morality. Confucius emphasized the importance of ritual practice for molding the individual personality to full humanity and for training the participant to an innate understanding of the fitting act through the ritual cultivation of collectively sanctioned behavior (Kline 188).

Confucianism was a non-theistic, pragmatic reordering of society according to a blend of ethics and aesthetics that sought to redirect ritual practice away from the supernatural realm and toward the enhancement of social life, which, in turn, influenced Chinese art (Zehou 46). In the fourth century B.C.E., Confucian scholar Xunzi further explicated a metapraxis of ritual that stressed its importance in reshaping human nature and behavior so that they conform to and participate in the numinous order of the Tao, a way of being devoted to the harmonious union of beauty and goodness. His *Yueji* (Notes on Music), part of the *Book of Rites*, became China's earliest document discussing aesthetics (47). Typical of the Chinese interdependence of ritual, art, and social ethics, the word *yue* can denote music, dancing, painting, sculpture, engraving, and architecture, as well as the ceremonial rites of the social order (48). The literal meaning of *yue* is "joy," indicating any activity whose sensory appeals made people happy (48).

Confucian ritual, according to Xunzi, aims at both expressing and restraining human nature, and at transforming human desires so as to render them harmless to the social order. When this is accomplished human beings can enter into a cooperative

relationship with Heaven and Earth that overcomes disorder in the cosmos and brings harmony between human beings and between humans and the natural world. According to Xunzi, without ritual, humankind will be unable to fulfill its desires, seeking fulfillment instead through its innate impulse toward competition, which will then cause the ethico-aesthetic order to disintegrate, a position remarkably similar to Eagleton's, although it was formulated hundreds of years before capitalism ever developed. "The elements of human nature," writes Xunzi, "if followed without direction of ritual and the social roles (*yi*) embodied in the rites, will lead people into chaos and conflict [. . . ;] all those who follow their nature and indulge their natural inclinations will inevitably become involved in wrangling and strife, will violate the forms and patterns of society, and will end up in violence" (qtd. in Kline 191).

Because Chinese aesthetics, like Chinese philosophy, elevates emotional communication over cognition or imitation (Lehou 48), the Confucian scholar aims at the enhancement of "heart/mind," (Kline 200), a blend of cognitive, emotional, intuitive, and aesthetic sensibilities. The Confucian scholar, therefore, is one who orders his life around a devotion to moral cultivation through ritual practice based on a concept of the good that encompasses the notions of beauty, wholeness, and harmony. "The gentleman knows," writes Xunzi, "that what lacks completeness (*quan*) and purity (*cui*) does not deserve to be called beautiful (*mei*)" (qtd. 195). Indeed, one of the clearest indicators of high moral achievement, according to Confucian ethics, is the quality and breadth of one's aesthetic discernment, an idea that Kang echoes in *The Grass Roof* when he states, "Confucius taught that a man should not be ashamed of coarse food, humble clothing, and modest dwelling, but should only be ashamed of not being cultivated in the perception of beauty"



(7). It is understood, however, that the individual pursuit of beauty must always take place within the hierarchy of relationships maintained by a ritual order that cultivates the virtues of obedience and self-sacrifice and restrains the individual from destroying its harmony.

In an autumnal mood, *The Grass Roof* presents a pre-modern, pastoral community of the type Eagleton suggests was the repository of a ritual practice in which questions of knowledge, ethics, and beauty were united in the service of the social order. Kang's novel presents a pristine Korea before its annexation by Japan in which, much as Xunzi advocated, a continuous cycle of ritual celebrations perpetuates the beauty and harmony of a society on the brink of dissolution. In fact, the first half of *The Grass Roof* is essentially a series of ritual moments, including two rites of ancestor worship, a wedding, the Dragon festival, a scarification ritual, the ceremonial worship of the wandering ghosts, a pilgrimage to a Buddhist monastery, and a Korean funeral. Kang's descriptions of these rituals are some of the most beautiful and nostalgic passages in the novel:

The Ancestor's tomb was in the heart of stillness and pure air and mountain pines; [ . . . ] [The Annual Ancestor worship] occurred after the Harvest, during the harmonious days of October, keen, warm, bright, sunny days when the oak trees were golden and scarlet, and the lazy river was jeweled with a cargo of treasure.

[ . . . ]

We loved the all-day's march through the mountains, and the mysterious house at night, lit by torches of those who were preparing food for the Ancestor, and for his descendants too, to be eaten on the morrow. Early in the morning, everybody rose. First a great tray, larger than a wagon, was filled with all the best of

everything, and carried by two men, who grasped the handles at each end and placed it before the Ancestor's tomb. All the mature and distinguished men of the village bowed down to the ground for several moments and my crazy-poet uncle read aloud in a moving and eloquent voice a prose poem of his own composition, written in classical Chinese in the best calligraphy on a scroll of the finest Korean paper, four feet long and four feet wide. As always, it began, "In the Fall of the year, gathered together, we pray to Thee". . . and ended: Bless us, and continue, Thou, to sleep in peace." All the men were in clean white robes. (16,19)

A similarly depiction of the importance of Confucian ritual aesthetics occurs at the New Year, when the village feeds the ancestors again. In the following passage, Kang emphasizes not only the sensory appeals of ritual itself but also the regulation of social life through the fulfillment of ethical obligations according to an aesthetic pattern imposed by the ritual order. In addition, the scene evokes Chungpa's sense of awe at the spectacle as well as the sense of security he experienced through his participation in a pre-ordained form imposed upon reality by the ancient sages:

This was done in the last room from the kitchen—our most formal room. A table had been spread with the best, and everything was done according to the Book of Rites, which has told the exact ceremonial arrangement for rice, meat, candy, salt, vinegar, and pepper. The spirit of the Ancestor would come before the cock crew. All men—my father, my uncle, and my more distant uncles and cousins—stood in white ceremonial dress with flowing sleeves and tassels. Crouching down on hands and knees, all bowed until the forehead almost touched the ground. Some

spectators overflowed to the porch. In the room next to the last room the women waited in silence. (42)

Not only do these rituals themselves serve as an aesthetic medium of expression, but they also serve as occasions for other artistic endeavors as well. As Kang describes in the first passage, for example, Chungpa's poet uncle reads a special poem that he has written for the occasion. Similarly, at the New Year's feeding of the ancestors, Kang reports that after the rites were completed every year, the entire village engaged in a poetry contest, pinning their poems on the walls of their rooms and the posts of their houses (39).<sup>61</sup> Prizes were given not only for the quality of the poetry but also for the beauty of the Chinese calligraphy. Indeed, *The Grass Roof* pays repeated tribute to poetry's power to overcome the forces of chaos and destruction through its imposition of an aesthetic order upon reality. In this respect, poetry serves a function much like the rituals in which it plays such an important role. In one important scene, Chungpa's poet uncle, who devotes his life to poetry and scholarship, tells him a story about an unarmed poet who attempts to pass by a ferocious tiger. Having no other weapons, the poet recites a poem. Upon hearing the poem, the tiger allows him to pass unharmed. "Even wild beasts," says his uncle, "had to respect poets and scholars" (125).

As aesthetically pleasing and secure as the ritual order might have been, however, it was not enough for Kang or his protagonist. "Life in such country districts as mine," writes Chungpa, "was a long unbroken dream, lasting thousands of years, in which the same experiences, the same thoughts, the same life came unceasingly, like the constantly reappearing flowers of Spring, *whose forms and attributes were the same*, although the

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<sup>61</sup> Kang tells us that his grass-roofed house "had eight pillars on the porch, each with a beautiful poem which was changed every New Year" (59).

individuals were changing” (100-1, emphasis added). Kang’s description captures his ambivalence regarding life as it was lived under the forms of Confucian ritual—beautiful and harmonious yet indifferent to the uniqueness of the individual. In particular, Kang criticizes the regulation of reproductive life, which forced women to remain at home to bring children into the world, and adolescent boys to marry, by arrangement, women many years their senior. In addition, Kang reports that, from the age of seven, “I often felt a dragon surge up in me prompting me to be too original, a habit which sometimes brought me in disgrace with parents” (16). It was Kang’s increasing sense of himself as “original,” as an individual, whose uniqueness was denied by the forms of Confucian ritual practice that led him to abandon his place in that order and to quest after the development of his unique capacities in the West.

After studying in Seoul for several years, Chungpa finally gets assistance to leave Korea. On the ship to America, Kang meditates on his youthful understanding of emigration through the eyes of Chungpa, who regards it as a quest for ideal beauty:

Above and around me on every side move sea-gulls, following the motion of the waves, leading on from mystery to mystery. It occurs to me that I am like a soul who has just cast off one life and is not yet born in another; these are the spirits of all the beautiful poets whom the muse has captured, attending me in my voyage to understand an alien beauty. But can beauty be alien? (366)

Chungpa envisions his muse as a beautiful Asian woman in Western dress whom he calls Princess Immortality and whom he hopes to find in America: “She seems isolated like myself, a woman with no nationality. Is she of West or East? Is she a Chinese or a Japanese? Is she European or American? Now she alone touches the chord to which my

heart dances, because of how she stands and looks into the night. Her eyes too are on the far off stars. And from the milky way they move to look at me” (367). The figure embodies his quest for the realization of the Confucian ideal of completion in America through the unification of East and West in the life of the poet/scholar.

Six years later, however, Kang published *East Goes West*, which narrates his disappointing and meandering quest for America as the aesthetic and moral utopia he had envisioned during his voyage. Indeed, the two novels should be read in succession to gain their full impact, since the latter novel is informed by and comments upon the former. In *East Goes West*, Chungpa Han arrives in America as an eighteen-year old full of the wisdom of the East and longing to complement it with the knowledge of the West, a young man whose understanding of the fitting act has been molded by the patterns imposed by the ritual practice of Confucianism. Chungpa is still deeply committed to the Confucian ideal of the scholar whose moral duty it is to cultivate wisdom and the appreciation of beauty in order to fulfill his place in society. Indeed, he emphatically states, “A man has no place in society, Confucius teaches, unless he understands aesthetics” (*The Grass Roof* 7). Yet, the collision of Confucian aesthetic morality with Western capitalist pragmatism will become the central problem of *East Goes West* and a major factor in Chungpa Han’s continued inability to establish a sense of place in America.

In *The Grass Roof*, Kang foreshadows the subsequent loss of his ethico-aesthetic moorings in *East Goes West* in a key memory of a ritual performed in the Temple of Confucius, a scene in which he catapults us into the present in order to look back on the past as he now sees it. “One quiet night in New York City, looking down Madison

Avenue at Grand Central Station, I was suddenly reminded of the Temple of Confucius, by I don't know what of massive gravity and power. But noisy trains enter there, and not the ghost of the immemorial sage, Confucius, quietly" (126). Kang holds up this mechanical thundering of the trains in and out of Grand Central Station as a foil to the aesthetic power of Confucian ritual to refine the inner man:

[The temple] was set in the heart of nature; the services were very ceremonious, and all about it, the atmosphere seemed solemn [. . .] When the priest carried the cup of wine up the long steps, he went very slowly. His ceremonial robe was very long with wide sleeves and tassels sweeping the ground; it was white or sky-blue in color, and he wore a kind of mitre with two ears, which symbolized the mountain on which the father of Confucius once prayed for his birth. While the wine went up the steps no one dared to breathe loudly. Lined up below in the big yard, standing in ranks on the steps, were the other priests, all clad in this same way. Of course there were a number of priests, for everybody who worshipped was a priest, but he must be a poet and a scholar [. . .] All the poets and scholars looked up to receive the ghost of the learned Confucius, while my uncle read from a long scroll of white silk the first stanza of the Chinese hymn [. . .] After the benefits of the ghost were received, the spirit was escorted away while my uncle read these words:

Fount high on Mount Ah-Ah!

Choo-Choo and Sa murmur,

Rivers that never run dry

Although the source is far.

In order should our rites be done  
 To hymn the Lord Confucius' fame,  
 He who refined the inner man  
 And gave all scholarship his name. (127)

Kang's use of the contrast between the mindless drive of the mechanized world toward the empty future and the measured, ritualized procession of the Confucian priests to the altar encapsulates the central conflict between American pragmatism and commercialism and Eastern aesthetic religion. In an ironic passage in *East Goes West*, Kang returns to this earlier ritual moment and makes a subtle critique through his comparison of Grand Central Station to the American mind:

Prophets of hereafter, poets of vision . . . , maybe the American is not so much these. But he is a good salesman, amidst scientific tools. His mind is like the Grand Central Station. It is definite, it is timed, it has mathematical precision on clearcut stone foundation. There may be monotonous dull repetition, but all is accurate and conscious. Stupid routine sometimes, but behind it, duty in the very look. Every angle and line has been measured. How solid the steel framework of Western civilization is! (163)

Throughout *East Goes West*, Kang repeatedly returns to ritual, and discussions *about* ritual, to recreate the poignant experience of the Asian from a hierarchical, positional society lost in a latitudinarian world without forms. In addition, he captures the essential homelessness of the Confucian scholar/poet in America, where the human impulse toward competition has been allowed to run amok, and where the aesthetic and the moral are the tools of commerce, class, and race. One of the greatest strengths of the

novel is its capacity to turn the tables on the Anglo-American gaze at the Asian. Kang subverts the American stereotype of “ugly, primitive hordes” of Asians at every turn, making plain the loneliness of American individualism and the unaesthetic quality of life lived without ritual patterns amidst mechanization and economic competition supported by a chaotic *mélange* of social ethics centered, not on individual restraint, as Xunzi advocated, but on individual acquisition.

In contrast to *The Grass Roof*, which portrayed a homogeneous society in which his protagonist was certain of the fitting act, *East Goes West* paints a series of ethico-aesthetic blunders. Chungpa’s first real job, for example, is as a houseboy to a wealthy Long Island family. The entire episode concerns his first attempts to understand the fitting act in the new American context. Again, Kang uses the scene as a foil to the Korean rituals depicted in *The Grass Roof*. In contrast to the rural Shangri-La of his Korean village, a collective society at one with nature, Chungpa goes to serve in a newly-laid-out suburb where one lone house stands in a grid of empty streets, the unnatural, individualist, and class-conscious aesthetics of which do not please him:

I did not care for the house. It ought here to be a farmhouse but nobody attempted to make it a farm. It was a three-story concrete, very abrupt to look at in that flat space. There was a tiny hedge a little dog could jump and an artificial lawn with gravel paths. On the wind also you could smell the sea, but there was no sea smell about the house. It negated Nature, but the city was not transported yet. In a few years there would be many houses [. . .] Now, with neither society nor privacy, it was desolate. (61)



Further, Chungpa stumbles repeatedly in his attempts to perform the fitting act expected of him by his wealthy employer. For instance, when he gets out of the car to open the door for her, he trips over his books and sprawls on the pavement. The woman looks at their Oriental covers and echoes nativist fears of Asian microbes when she shudders and murmurs, "I hope they have no germs" (62). At dinner, Chungpa's Korean companion struggles to teach him the order of service, but he cannot master it quickly enough to satisfy his mistress: "'Fork on left, spoon on right. . . pour water over right shoulder. . . offer meat on left. . . don't take away plate under soup bowl till end of soup.' How was I to remember all of this? It was like learning the Chinese book of Rites in five minutes" (63). Needless to say, none of Chungpa's actions at the dinner service is fitting, and he is eventually fired. The scene makes plain the sad irony of a man, trained in poetry and aesthetics devoted to communal celebrations in the temples of an ancient society, who now appears as a clumsy primitive attempting to mimic the incomprehensible rites of class proprietorship in the lonely house of a cultural wasteland.

Chungpa's major ambition is to study at an American university. Before the contribution of an anonymous donor finally frees him to study full-time, however, Chungpa holds a variety of odd jobs to support himself. At each juncture, he attempts to discern the fitting act in America only to be enlightened further regarding the perversion of the relationship between beauty and morality in the American capitalist system. When he works as a waiter in a restaurant, where, true to the historical record, dozens of Koreans with M.D.s and Ph.D.s serve American patrons because they are excluded from jobs in their field, Chungpa learns to apply capitalist aesthetics to customers, sizing them up based on their ability to tip well (89). When Chungpa, the descendant of scholars who

viewed learning as completely separate from material gain, takes a job selling an encyclopedia entitled *Universal Education*, he is instructed in the aesthetics of commercial enterprise by Mr. Lively, a man who rates Edgar A. Guest as a great poet “because he makes a lot of money with his writing and he is a good moral man” (152). Mr. Lively preaches to Chungpa that “salesmanship is an art,” then goes about explaining the strategy of pushing the unnecessary item to the customer under the pretense of providing a service, adding, “of course you know you are making more money for yourself as well as your company when you sell the most expensive binding” (157). Chungpa compares these sales strategies to those of American missionaries selling their religion to Orientals who already had a more ancient one of their own (158).

One summer, Chungpa works as a hand on a farm. While weeding a field, he engages in a meditation that evokes the plight of the uprooted Asian poet/scholar in the competitive American economic order:

Those weeds. . . I felt a kind of pity for them as I worked. They were just as good-looking as the crops, sometimes much better, for many meadow flowers grew among them. I could not hate them except that they did not give fruits, and still they tried to compete. Poor weeds! Poor golden daisies! And as soon as I had cut them off from their cool roots in the earth, the hot sun dried them up. That sun was merciless. (212)

In this passage, Kang subtly compares the beautiful “uselessness” of the flowers to the Confucian practitioner of a moral aestheticism that cannot flourish in the field of American pragmatism, which allows no space for the contemplation of the beautiful and sees the good only in useful products.

After his graduation, Chungpa, whose sensibilities have been shaped by a Korean aesthetic that emphasizes the beauty of emptiness over unnecessary clutter, briefly works at Boshnack's department store in Philadelphia, where he is further educated in the art of selling the unnecessary item.<sup>62</sup> The store routinely emphasizes the aesthetic exterior of poor quality merchandise to appeal to the tastes of unsuspecting buyers and uses special aesthetics in women's dressing rooms to enhance their appearance and their desire to buy (311). The long arguments over poetry and music that Kang depicts in *The Grass Roof* are now replaced by daily sessions in which salesmen tell dirty jokes, even about their own wives. Demoralized by his environment, Chungpa complains to a co-worker that laboring in a store "costs too much in soul-destroying energy. A store is worse than a factory. The aim is always money, things, sales . . . never life, never creation of anything. It turns away from life. It makes humanity into just a stuff-handling machine." His American co-worker, however, takes this as an insult to the store's owner, whom he feels is providing humanitarian service to those without capital, even though only providing them with soul-killing jobs (317-8).

Kang also manages to include some biting commentary on Western factory-style education, which he suggests is superficial and lacking in any real substance for the mind. One of its major faults, according to Chungpa, is the lack of training in aesthetics through the splitting off of the creative from the critical in the specialization of knowledge required by the capitalist division of labor:

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<sup>62</sup> During Chungpa's first job as houseboy to the wealthy woman on Long Island, he complains of the amount of dusting he must do because of the quantities of unnecessary furniture in the house, saying "In Korea, the beauty of a room is in its free space" (65).

My bewilderment and rebellion before American education were enhanced by looking back to Chinese models. Confucian education never required the study of anything but poetry, and it approached that mostly by being a poet. All scholars were poets. There was no division between the critical and the creative. None but the poets were scholars and none but poets attempted to write on poetry. It did not make for Aristotelian analysis, but it vitalized the whole field of knowledge to the creatively minded. This was the way I wanted to approach Western knowledge. And found it would not work, for there was no tradition like that in American education. I was distressed at the lack of unifying principles. (203)

American education, by emphasizing the ownership of a specialized corner of the knowledge market, results in a fragmented society of one-sided individuals who cannot achieve the Confucian aesthetic and moral ideal of wholeness sought by the poet/scholar, and who remain mired in unaesthetic lives, cut off from the true beauty and depth of reality:

And it seemed to me that the life of the specialist became utilized in an ever narrower groove, and did not reach the embracing whole of life. "Poor soul," I thought, "Poor modern soul, he is tortured in his confined prison never to get out . . . he must handle his specialty, never the infinite. He rides in his automobile over miles of paved space, but he does not leave the car he is riding in. He flies, but he never enters the air of the universe. He submarines, but never sinks himself to the heart of the ocean, he tunnels mountains, yet he never feels the spirit of earth, as Shelley or the Taoist poets did. (175)

Throughout Chungpa's quest for knowledge and success in America, Kang also exposes the racist aesthetics to which both Asians and African-Americans were continually subjected. In fact, no other immigrant novelist shows more sympathy for, and solidarity with, African-Americans than Kang. *East Goes West* is pervaded by subtle ironies that reveal the conflation and perversion of race, morality, and aesthetics in American society. For example, Chungpa is advised to cut his long hair when he arrives in America because, he is told, if one wants to look like a real American, he "should not look like an Indian" (18). He is repeatedly mistaken for a "Chinee" (25) because of the inability of Americans to distinguish differences in facial features among Oriental groups. When his Korean friend George Jum brings his white girlfriend to visit Chungpa at Mr. Lively's house, Mr. Lively tells Chungpa not to be friends with George because interracial couples do not look right to God (161). And when Chungpa goes to Harlem to see George's white girlfriend dance in black makeup, he also sees African-American comedians wearing even blacker makeup to make themselves appear comical by deliberately inciting Anglo-American disgust at the aesthetics of their appearance: "They looked funny enough in this northern western stream-lined civilization where the swiftest, sharpest line is the best. But still they had worked hard to make themselves much funnier" (80). Yet Kang also deliberately points out Harlem's aesthetic superiority to that of Manhattan:

the air was richer in suggestion, more emotion-filled; the colors had more depth, so had the smells; the lights, though not so numerous, seemed mellower, gaudier, more picturesque, the spice of Africa was in the atmosphere.[. . .] And the atmosphere was very rich and husky, suggesting, in amazing juxtaposition, the

warmth and humbleness of home, and the plaintive, alluring sadness of life's

farthest exile. . . a dimmer, vaster captivity than the Babylonian one . . . ." (20)

Kang's portrait of Harlem reveals his recognition of Confucian aesthetic values within African-American culture—subtlety, emotion, warmth, earthiness, and harmony between human beings and nature. At a later point, Kang tells us, "[A]s a stock character [the Oriental] is either a cruel and brutish heathen with horrid outlandish customs, or a subtle and crafty gentleman of inscrutable sophistications, [but] in the West the most salient virtue of the Confucian heritage (among its many faults) seems to have escaped notice, that virtue which strikes a peculiarly harmonious balance between being a wholesome animal and a dignified human" (209).<sup>63</sup> In this commentary on Western stereotypes of Asians, Kang makes plain their clumsy misapprehension of Asian character as a result of the Western tendency to split and separate in contrast to the Asian impulse to join and harmonize.

As Chungpa wanders throughout Northeastern America, unable to root himself anywhere, he eventually comes upon an African-American evangelist named Bonheure, who, recognizing a good bet in Chungpa's erudition and eloquence, wants to hire him as a speaker. Chungpa is equally intrigued with Bonheure and agrees to work for him. But Bonheure, we quickly learn, is another questionable figure. He has converted an old movie theater into a church, where he evangelizes the poor and needy Negro community. He has set up an alternative society of saints, where all live communally, turning their

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<sup>63</sup> Kang's identification with the plight of African Americans, as well as the numerous points of comparison between *East Goes West* and Ralph Ellison's later novel *Invisible Man*, suggests the possibility of its influence on Ellison's novel. *East Goes West* concerns the coming of age of a man of color who arrives in the Northeastern United States with hopes for success, engages in a variety of positions under different mentors which ultimately reveal to him the emptiness of many forms of American life, concludes with the protagonist in an underground room, and even contains a character by the name of Rhinehart.

wages over to him in exchange for room and board. Bonheure lives much better than the saints, however, wearing expensive suits and preaching to them about the moral importance of his having a beautiful and expensive automobile to drive around town.

When Bonheure arranges for a public baptism in a nearby river, Chungpa, who claims he has already been baptized, watches the ritual from the banks:

Tall and handsome, he waded out, a white silk surplice over his clothes, until he was over waist-deep. The converts were not so well protected. They wore white robes of a thin sleezy [*sic*] cheesecloth, and nothing on besides but the birthday suit. [. . .] Spectators were lined up ranks deep on the riverbank, and I saw them laughing and laughing, for they had come for the show. It was burlesque. I don't suppose Bonheure really meant it to be so sexy (though always he knew how to appeal to the crowd, white as well as black). But those nightgowns, as soon as they got wet, clung like filmy gauze and carved out every mold.[. . .] But the saints didn't see that, neither the old ones nor the new ones. They were exalted and serious. Tears came in their eyes, as they watched the long line of Negroes in white robes going down into the river, and coming up clean, with howls and hosannas, made more intense and vibrational by the cold water and wind. With the saints, the spirit was moving too much . . . .the flesh wasn't weak enough to think how the flesh looks sometimes. (369)

Kang's inclusion of this ritual scene late in the novel as a spectacle of public ridicule says much about the place of ritual in mainstream American life. While the Negroes feel their experience to be full of meaning, those on the outside of the ritual do not recognize it as a fitting act of moral and aesthetic beauty, assessing it only on the basis of the aesthetics of

race and class. The fitting act for the Negroes becomes, consequently, nothing more than comedy for the Anglo-American public, whose reaction involves contempt and disgust that again call to mind Captain Bourke's reaction to the Zuñis. In a society that splinters the aesthetic from the moral in the service of acquisition, Kang suggests, rituals, which attempt to fuse the two in the service of collective harmony, have no real place, particularly the rituals of those racial groups whose appearance mar the Nordic American portrait of America. Kang also uses the baptismal rite to make a trenchant comment about the immigration experience itself. Baptism is *the* ritual of immigration, used by many immigrant writers, such as Mary Antin, as a symbol of their birth into a new life. Kang makes numerous references to it throughout *The Grass Roof* and *East Goes West*.<sup>64</sup> The baptism of the Negroes, in turn, suggests that, despite its promise of individual fulfillment, the baptism of immigration may in fact be merely a burlesque, a process which immigrants undergo with religious fervor but which may never change but merely confirm their status as comic figures relegated to the margins of society, from whence they give over their hard-earned dollars in good faith to a spiritual charlatan.

Kang makes especially good use of two figures in *East Goes West* who serve to embody opposing stances toward American aesthetics, morality, and the issue of assimilation. George Jum, a Korean who befriends Chungpa when he arrives, advocates complete assimilation, applying the aesthetics of American movies, magazines, and marketplace to his wardrobe and his love life. George has cast off Korean culture as

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<sup>64</sup> To cite just a few examples: In *The Grass Roof*, Kang explains that he once cut off his long hair because "I wanted to do something like a baptism" (183). Before he and his grandmother begin their Buddhist pilgrimage, they undergo a baptism in a tank of water to cleanse themselves. In *East Goes West*, Chungpa Han talks of being "baptized in the roars of Manhattan traffic" (13), of being baptized into the world of sales by Mr. Lively (154), and of his longing to jump into a river near Boston to "wash off all the dirt and send them down to the sea, becoming a child again" (253).



useless to his assimilationist agenda, and he imitates the image and behavior of the self-assured, worldly-wise American “bachelor” used to sell products—wearing fashionable clothes, flirting, necking, telling dirty jokes, writing love poems ahead of time in case he should need one in a romantic escapade, and dating a white call girl who dons black makeup in order to dance at a club in Harlem (Kim 38). When George’s girlfriend throws him over, he eventually retreats to Hawaii and settles down with a Korean-American girl, realizing that the role of the freewheeling American bachelor will always be an illusion for the Oriental. In a letter to Chungpa, George is careful to remind him that “I have not failed, I have only not succeeded” (399).

It is in the second figure of Chungpa’s older friend Kim, however, that Kang makes his most salient commentary on American aesthetics, morality, and the effects of mechanization, modernization, and individualism, not only on the Asian, but also on modern humankind in general. Chungpa meets Kim in a Chinese restaurant where, recently arrived and penniless, he has been given free food in exchange for writing poetry. With some embarrassment in the garish electric glare of the restaurant, the two men attempt to share their mutual love of Chinese poetry and art. When Kim finds the aesthetics of the place too inhospitable to the subject, he insists they walk to his apartment, which is sensitively arranged and filled with Chinese art, much of which he has painted himself (167). There, Kim tells the hopeful and inexperienced Chungpa, “You remind me of myself some fifteen years ago” (171). Unlike the other Korean exiles, Kim does not have to struggle to survive. The son of wealthy parents who support him through their large rice business, Kim has traveled and studied all over the world and has

mastered both Eastern and Western learning, but he claims to have found nothing in either tradition to sustain him:

Nothing to root man, nothing to anchor him . . . I have not been idle. For sixteen years I have wrestled, in Germany, Italy, France, England, America, leading myself into a Kantian labyrinth, into an Hegelian logomachy, into a scholastic inferno (yet not through any Protestantism nor Catholicism) into the geometric abstractions of Einstein. . . and I can find nothing [. . .] [I]n former life I was an Eastern poet. . . but tell me, what now is to be our fate? Being unable to go back to that previous existence, being unable to label ourselves in this new world . . . becoming lost within another lost world? (178)

Like the daisies in the New England farmer's field, Kim is useless to American society because he cannot produce anything but beauty. Kim, in turn, believes the moral values of America are centered on production and acquisition, values he finds repugnant as well as off limits to the Asian: "The only goal for a man here is money and power. But money and power in New York are not for men of my race. Even if we succeeded, we would not be admired for that, but only hated and feared [. . .] Pagans coming over to spoil good manners and respectable morals. When powerless, pagans are more tolerable, isn't that so?" (232)

In contrast to Chungpa's hopeful determination to blend East and West in his experience, and George's one-sided and superficial imitation of American commercial images, Kim is so thoroughly marked by the aesthetic morality of his Confucian upbringing that he cannot adapt it to Western capitalist models, and thus lives a half-life on the margins of society. Without a place in the moral or aesthetic order, Kim implodes

into an alternative world where he can live in inverse proportion to the extroverted productivity of American life. In a poetic foreshadowing of later events in the novel, Kim calmly explains at a dinner party:

A famous Chinese philosopher was asked what he would do with a useless tree. He said, "Why not plant it in the land of non-existence and yourself lie in a state of bliss beneath it, inactive by its side? No ax nor other hammer could touch it, and being useless, it would be safe from danger." This has been my philosophy, in utilitarian civilizations where I and my muse are not wanted. My life is the useless tree. I try to plant my tree in the land of non-existence. (233)

Chungpa recognizes Kim as "the man of lost patterns, the man with a deep Confucian love of ordered life" (240). His inability to live without the collective forms and patterns of Confucian ritualized life has rendered the Westernized Kim, in spite of his assiduous cultivation of his individuality, unable to function in modern Western life. Kim hints at his need for the collective patterns of ritual observance as well as his deep sense of loss when he critiques Western individualist romantic love through an anecdote about Confucian mourning rituals:

From the fourth century B.C. comes a story. A man saw a little child crying hard for the loss of its parents. He said to his teacher, a Confucian scholar, "I could never understand the rites of mourners. Here in this child we have an honest expression of feeling, and that is all there should ever be." The teacher rebuked him. "The mourning ceremonial with all its accompaniments is at once a check upon undue emotion and a guarantee against any lack of proper respect. Simply to

give vent to feelings is the way of barbarians. That is not our way.” Well, this little child crying is the way of Western love. (241)

Kim’s evaluation of the collective value of ritual mourning reproduces almost exactly Emil Durkheim’s discussion of the same topic: “Mourning is not the spontaneous expression of individual emotions [. . .] Mourning is not a natural movement of private feelings wounded by a cruel loss; it is a duty imposed by the group. One weeps, not simply because he is sad, but because he is forced to weep. It is a ritual attitude, which he is forced to adopt out of respect for custom, but which is in a large measure, independent of his affective state” (397). For Kim, who still uses the Confucian moral measuring rod of discipline and adherence to collective ethico-aesthetic norms, “love is [. . .] the barbaric emotion, for love brings forgetfulness of pride, decorum, dignity, and family duties toward others” (242). Sadly, as well as ironically, while Kim exalts these values over romantic love because they maintain social cohesion, he himself has capitulated to “the barbaric emotion” in his love for the American Helen Hancock, who, in turn, upholds the very Confucian values Kim promotes in refusing to marry him out of a sense of duty to her upper-class New England family who finds his race unacceptable.

Kim, like Abraham Cahan’s Naphtali, the atheist who doggedly continues his devotion to Talmudic recitation, nevertheless recognizes his need for the beauty and clarity provided by Confucian ritual forms even though he cannot embrace any enduring philosophical position:

Buddhism and I both died in the land that gave us birth. Still its candles, so my candles [he pointed] burn over the shrines of strangers [. . .] Let us not doubt: once under that pippala branch and morning star, the mystic dawn did come to

that ascetic Gautama. But that was long ago. In the twentieth century on the cold hard pavement, worlds and centuries away, what of it? Here we are in the agony of that dreadful night, dream-haunted, solitary, as the babe that has never smiled, yet filled with the lonely experience of weary old age. Empty grumblings, rhythmic rumblings. Sight may not come again. Old man, poor man. . . dawn is too far ahead. But bow. We should bow to our ancestral candles. (273)

As this passage indicates, for the alienated Kim, ritual may provide something similar to that which he suggests is produced by art: “something beyond the form of things, though its importance lies in preserving the form of things” (234).<sup>65</sup>

At thirty-five, Kim is approximately the same age Kang was when he wrote *East Goes West*. In Kim’s discussions with the eighteen-year-old Chungpa Han, Kang thus engages in a dialogue between his older and younger selves, and, in the fate of Kim, deals perhaps with the too-sensitive aesthete within himself whom he had to sacrifice in order to make his pilgrimage to America successful. For, after a few years during which he loses track of Kim, Chungpa stumbles upon him again, now impoverished due to the failure of his family’s business under Japanese occupation, cut off from his beloved Helen due to the racial prejudice of her family, and lost in nihilism and despair. Chungpa feels himself infected by Kim’s death wish to the point that he runs from him. He later discovers a newspaper notice of the suicide of a “Japanese” on Bleeker Street, whom he believes is Kim. When he goes to Kim’s old apartment to inquire, he finds all of Kim’s precious works of art have been burned, and his landlady cannot even tell him where Kim

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<sup>65</sup> Kang puts a similar sentiment regarding the importance of ritual forms in the mouth of an Italian-American, Chungpa’s friend Dimassi, who explains that he remains a Catholic because “It was a pattern or tune needed to make life ordered and harmonious. Many Americans missed that [. . .] He preached to me one day about becoming Americanized and losing all sense of values” (262).

is buried (393). The novel ends indeterminately with Chungpa Han still alone, still caught between East and West and unsure of where he belongs, hoping that his recent dream of being burned alive means, according to Buddhist tradition, the hope of a happier reincarnation (401).

Kang's original title for *East Goes West* was *Death of an Exile* (Kim 287, n. 34), suggesting that the figure of Kim may once have been the novel's major focus. Elaine Kim claims that the novel evinces Kang's belief in Eastern decay and Western rebirth (33), but, given the importance of the character of Kim and the ambivalence of the ending, the novel seems much more skeptical than that. Elaine Kim also suggests that the novel does not speak for the majority of Asians in America and that its chief value lies in its being the first full-length book written in English by a Korean and in recording the experience of the many Asians who worked as domestics, waiters and cooks, and who studied at American universities (43). More significantly, she categorically states that Kang "remained unable to fully analyze the significance of his American odyssey" (43). Such statements fail to appreciate the larger purposes Kang's novels serve for the Asian and the American, as well as their irony and deep philosophical vision.

While it is true that Kang's novels do not depict the grueling physical toil endured by countless Asians who built and served America, they do accomplish some extremely important goals for the Asian-American. Kang deftly returns the American gaze at the Asian and refutes stereotypes of primitive, dirty hordes of Mongols in his presentation of a small group of lonely Korean exiles, men of culture, dignity, decorum, and delicate sensibilities who are devoted to poetry, art, and scholarship, men who do not struggle with the English language but speak it with impressive eloquence. Further, in looking

back at American conceptions of the fitting act, Kang reveals the American as the reverse image of Madison Grant's most cherished notions. It is the American who is now unaesthetic, a carbon-copy of the next man, yet deeply lonely, whose heart/mind is devoted not to wholeness and completion but split by the specialization required by capitalism, dedicated not to collective harmony but to beating his competitor at the economic game—and, most importantly for this study, engaged in questionable aesthetic and moral pursuits that have no ritual patterns for refining the sensibilities of the inner man but instead destroy the soul in the interests of class, race, and acquisition.

On a broader scale, the second novel in particular deserves to be read as a chronicle not only of the Asian experience but also of the existential exile of all human beings who have been dislocated by the experience of modernity and the loss of collective patterns of existence. When Kang tells us, "I mused on change in the world. I felt that nothing lasts. Where was the ancient habitation of my fathers, where were its ordered ways and everlasting laws? Gutted by time" (127), and when he exclaims, "ah, individualism! It is a lonesome world" (349), the voice is not simply that of the displaced Oriental but of fragmented modernity itself. In this respect, the novel deserves recognition for allowing the Asian voice to speak its particular experience while also serving as a universal voice of existential loss. *East Goes West* shows us the difficulty of discerning the fitting act in a world in which universal forms and patterns no longer exist, where the ways in which such forms may be imposed upon us by others are less easily discernible than those used in a Confucian temple, where the morality of the orders and instruments of power who do impose their forms upon the rest of us is less easily evaluated, and where such power is increasingly difficult to challenge. In *The Grass Roof*

and *East Goes West*, Kang reveals to us the increasing irony of modern attempts to pass by the tiger armed only with a poem.

Through their use of ritual's subtle interplay between aesthetics and morality, all of these novelists demonstrate, for better or worse, the problematic relationship between the aesthetic and the moral in the American capitalist order as well as the complex role of ritual aesthetics in maintaining moral integrity. For Steiner, the encounter with the beautiful in ritual practice can become a dangerous form of moral anaesthesia, deadening its participants to the worldly ethical requirements they symbolically enact in beautiful gestures. Steiner's novel suggests that, although morality without aesthetics may be less enjoyable, aesthetics without morality is dangerous. Conversely, for Yezierska, to deny the aesthetic needs of the individual is to weaken the moral sensitivity of the soul and to impoverish a potentially richer experience of the moral life. Furthermore, Yezierska argues, if beauty is indeed the province of the Anglo-American elite, then the Jew, and, by extension, all other ethnicities, should have equal access to it. Similarly, for Kang, the beautiful, especially when cultivated through the forms and patterns of ritual practice, is necessary to a complete understanding of the good, but, like Steiner, Kang suggests that the aesthetic can falsify the moral when it is separated from it and used for purposes other than the creation of a harmonious social order. While Kang recognizes the human need for a unified society supported by beautiful patterns of ritual practice and laments their destruction by a system conditioned by greed and ethnocentrism, he also realizes, however, that such pleasures may simply no longer be possible for modern men and women whose moral, cultural, and epistemological underpinnings have been irrevocably compromised and whose powerful and competitive economic structures now require



them to sacrifice the comforts of aesthetic experience and social harmony for individual survival.

The recurring ritual scenes in the fiction of these immigrant novelists reveal the power of ritual, with its exploration of the fitting act through symbolic gesture, its strategic use of sensory appeals, and the imposition of forms and patterns upon the world, to express multiple concerns regarding the question of how to define the *kalon-agathon* in capitalist America. In their portraits of the immigrant's quest for the fitting act, these novelists implicitly take up the question of whether it is better to have one conception of the beautiful and the good that applies to all Americans or to try to accommodate different notions under one national umbrella. In their different ways, these writers also manifest the perennial frustration experienced by ethnic groups for whom ideas of beauty, and access to it, are conditioned by the expectations of one dominant race or class in the socio-economic power structure. Each novelist asks us to consider *whose* definitions of beauty and goodness should predominate and the dangerous ways in which those definitions might be sullied by other, less noble concerns.

As all three novelists demonstrate, the positive or negative effect of ritual's aesthetic power is ultimately dependent upon the moral integrity of those who use it. Since ritual asserts boundaries, it enacts subtle yet powerful messages regarding *our* notions of the fitting act versus *their* notions. And as the Nazi rituals at Nuremberg in the 1930s made clear, *our* notions can sometimes be grotesquely wrong. Therefore, the use of aesthetics and other powerful strategies in ritual, as these novelists suggest, requires us to look carefully at the motives behind their use. For the immigrants, their rituals, which asserted the aesthetic and moral legitimacy of their bodies and actions, could be a means

of reassurance, aesthetic pleasure, and cultural resistance within a system that viewed them as deformed appendages to the Nordic American social body. Yet, even within these immigrant groups themselves, the artistic strategies of ritual did not always function in behalf of all participants equally and could be used to impose forms of social hierarchy that were unjust.<sup>66</sup> Thus, as Eagleton suggests, while the separation of the aesthetic from the moral achieved by the development of capitalism has indeed resulted in serious injury to human wholeness and dignity, perhaps that separation is necessary for the achievement of a reconciliation of the two in a higher economic and moral order in which human beings can express a utopian vision that reunites the beautiful and the good in ritual *and* in society at large while also continually subjecting that vision to unflinching moral scrutiny. These novels implicitly suggest the importance of such a difficult quest as well as the powerful human need to feel part of a ritual order through which one can achieve a sense of security, belonging, and justification—a sense of redemption. As the final chapter will explore, this proved to be true not only for immigrants but for a large number of native-born Americans as well.

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<sup>66</sup> Kang, for example, describes the Confucian order in Korea as extremely discriminatory toward women, the young, and the poor, who were not allowed to participate in ritual observance.

## Chapter Five: Immigrant Ritual, Immigrant Identity, and Redemptive

### Hegemony

As the July Fourth ceremonials at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 were about to begin, the planning committee had a serious problem. Because they had somehow neglected to schedule a Protestant minister to officiate at the event, there was no one to ask God's blessings on the American nation at this most important occasion. In desperation, the committee summoned at the last minute a Muslim *imam*, one Jamal Effendi, from the Cairo Street mosque, to stand in. A reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* later described with ambivalence the patriotic ceremony at which this Muslim cleric, before a hushed crowd, "turned his face toward the East and raised his hands in supplication," "chanting a prayer to Allah for his blessing on the United States, the flag above him, and the Exposition in Chicago," while "half-naked Soudanese [*sic*], long-gowned Arabs, Chinamen, and Turks" looked on, and "at every break in his prayer the Mohammedans united in a loud amen." According to the reporter, following Effendi's prayer, "the Cairo Street men led a rousing cheer for the U.S." Not knowing what to make of the sight of an *imam* standing beneath the American flag asking blessings on a Christian nation from a Muslim deity while a motley group of foreigners attempted to partake in an American civic ritual, the reporter finally ended his account with a summary description of the Columbian July Fourth celebration as "patriotic and beautiful" but, at the same time, "grotesque" (*Chicago Tribune* 4 July 1893).

The spectacle of the July Fourth ceremonials, at which the American flag flew over the ritual chant of a Middle Eastern cleric to the discomfort of native-born Americans, presents in microcosm the ironies and complexities at work in native attempts

to construct America as an Anglo-Protestant temple of national worship by means of the cult of a monolithic civil religion at the very moment when immigrants were entering its portals with multiple forms of religious practice. While the *imam* offered his ritual chant in good faith beneath the American flag, his Muslim religious practice positioned him as an outsider to Anglo-Protestant American civil religion, unsettling the native-born, who saw his attempt to sanctify America by means of a strange appeal to a lesser deity as somehow grotesque. The reporter's ambivalence suggests that while the cheer for the United States that erupted after the *imam*'s prayer may have been a joyous affirmation of national unity by multiple ethnic groups, some Anglo-American witnesses may have experienced some relief when it drowned out the troubling Middle Eastern tones that rang in the clear Midwestern air, for such music raised discordant questions regarding the identity of the American community and the nature of the religious symbols and practices that should be allowed to speak for that community. Beneath such questions lay the still more troubling presence of masses of immigrants with religious practices that enacted alternative sets of loyalties and implicit obligations that stood in the way of their assimilation into the American civic order.

As we have seen, ritual establishes boundaries and defines the identities of communities by displaying and reinforcing the ultimate loyalties of its participants. For that reason, it served as a particularly effective medium through which immigrant writers could interrogate issues of divided loyalties and the clash of competing redemptive orders in America. In their novels, immigrant protagonists repeatedly become entangled in multiple bids for dominance by competing orders of power as they seek to define themselves in the American context. Ritual moments, in turn, become markers of their

identity, signifying their proximity to or distance from their ethno-religious communities and the larger American civic order. Furthermore, as we have already seen in the case of Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, these rituals can sometimes even become points of crisis at which the immigrant must choose between conflicting allegiances. In these critical moments, these immigrant writers also provide insight into the fundamental relationship between ethnic religion and American identity.

The theologizing experience of immigration that Timothy Smith has described was one that often intensified the immigrants' preoccupation with the ethical dimensions of their faith and their need for a religious community in which to define those dimensions (1175). Smith argues that many immigrants came to America partly as a result of religious and political awakenings in a rapidly changing and pluralizing Europe that propelled them toward radically new goals of "autonomy, self-realization and mobility" and increased their sense of the religious and ethnic nuances of a newly emerging sense of individual identity (1162-5). According to Smith, the immigration experience contained three important factors that intertwined issues of identity, ethnicity, and religious practice for the immigrant: it increased the religious boundaries of the immigrants' understanding of their own peoplehood, intensified the psychological basis of theological reflection and ethno-religious commitment, and revived their sense that the goal of history lay in the creation of a universal brotherhood (1161). The last two developments, according to Smith, made the relationship between religion and ethnicity dialectical, often resulting in a tension between a desire for inclusion in a universal brotherhood and a commitment to ethnic particularity. "Even while affirming that the unity of all mankind was the goal," Smith writes, "intensified religious commitment

defined more sharply the boundaries of subcultures and communities” (1161).

Immigrant fiction explores these tensions as some protagonists face a choice between the particular concerns of their immigrant groups and inclusion in a larger order perceived as somehow universally redemptive, while others attempt to live in the margins between the two.

Such tensions were perhaps inevitable for religious immigrants whose break with the past caused them to face tremendous psychic challenges (1174). Upon their arrival in the United States, immigrants confronted the difficult process of defining themselves while being defined by a startling variety of communities. As Smith observes:

Each immigrant had to determine how to act in these new circumstances by reference not simply to a dominant “host” culture but to a dozen competing subcultures, all of which were in the process of adjustment to the materialism and the pragmatism that stemmed from the rush of both newcomers and old timers to get ahead. This complex challenge to choose among competing patterns of behavior affected immigrants in all periods of American history; and they persisted in dealing with it on religious terms. (1175)

Immigrant religious bodies felt these same pressures on a collective scale. Jay Dolan makes the important observation that the socio-political situation in capitalist America created an atmosphere that encouraged religious division. According to Dolan, “Religious freedom meant that as many religions as the people wanted would be able to compete in the marketplace. Such competition not only nurtured division, but it also meant that each group had to define itself clearly so that its identity would be recognizable in the midst of the religious marketplace” (*The American Catholic Experience* 238). Such competition

between religious groups meant that individuals within those groups were forced to reevaluate what it meant to be a member.

The repeated use of ritual in immigrant fiction suggests that this pattern continued even in the literary world, as writers themselves struggled with self-definition among competing communities. Recognizing the dramatic economy of the ritual moment, immigrant writers thus frequently chose to use religious rituals as nodes around which they could entangle and untangle issues of identity, personal ethics, and insider/outsiderhood. Often, as in the case of Cahan's David Levinsky, immigrant characters will confront a situation exactly like that described by Smith:

Which cultural home should a young man choose? The tradition-oriented group that had preceded him here from the old country and presented itself as guardian of a past he sensed must disappear? The value system of the Americanizing culture-brokers living on the fringes of his own community? The culture of what he perceived to be a "successful" immigrant group that settled here earlier than his own? One or another of the "native" American subcultures shared by persons of his religious faith? Or the secular and hence non-ethnic culture of the wider "urban community," which he identified with mass communications, politics, popular entertainment, and a soulless economic order? When one personal crisis or another prompted fears of the dissolution of the person the young immigrant thought he had been, ordinary questions of behavior led into more profound ethical ones, setting the terms by which the religion of his forbears had to respond. (1176)

One of the ways in which the religions of their forebears could respond to crises of identity among immigrants was through their ritual practice, which, by its strategic ability to subsume questions of identity, ethical responsibility, and insider/outsiderhood under the concerns of the larger socio-religious order and to “nurtur[e] those morally transforming experiences that the whole membership perceived to be saving” could be one means by which ethno-religious communities could lay claim to the loyalties of their members and thus preserve their collective identity in the face of powerful cultural forces ( 1178).

On the most fundamental level, the periodicity of ritual serves to reinforce individual identity by providing a sense of continuity in linking the present with the past and the future and in reassuring participants that they, and the world they live in, are essentially the same as they were and that they will remain so (Kertzer 10). However, when a ritual participant leaves one world behind and enters another, or is subject to experiences that radically alter his or her sense of identity, as was often the case with immigrants, those rituals that were meant to ensure continuity and stability can become anguished moments of epiphany that reveal the degree to which one’s former life has been lost.

Furthermore, ritologists Jan Platvoet and Karel van der Toorn maintain that identity is first and foremost a product of the community to which one belongs and is largely a valuation of social position. Since it is in the interest of the cultural majority to maintain its stability by determining who is “in” and who is “out,” the rituals of the culture are often used to establish the boundaries of that community and to create distinctions between its members and the rest of the world (349-60). The pursuit of



identity is therefore often allied with the pursuit of a sense of empowerment within the boundaries of the community. At the same time, as Victor Turner has contended, rituals also create *communitas*, a human association apart from ordinary time and space in which the usual distinctions of the dominant social realm are temporarily abolished. Thus, as Barbara Boudewijnse observes, “rituals may [also] afford relief from the unremitting pursuit of social prestige” (125). This was often the case with immigrants, as well as other social groups, who could experience within the boundaries of the ritual order a sense of empowerment that they lacked in the larger American social order.

Catherine Bell has called ritual’s power to bestow a sense of identity on its participants through their fulfillment of the moral demands of the community “redemptive hegemony” (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* 83).<sup>67</sup> Bell defines redemptive hegemony as “the way in which reality is experienced as a natural weave of constraint and possibility, the fabric of day-to-day dispositions and decisions experienced as a field for strategic action. It presents a biased, nuanced rendering of the order of power *so as to facilitate the envisioning of personal empowerment through activity in the perceived system* (84, emphasis added). In other words, rituals strategically set up an order of power, often given authority from some transcendent source, which is subtly placed in opposition to other orders of power.<sup>68</sup> The participant, in turn, simultaneously absorbs the

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<sup>67</sup> To coin her term, Bell borrows concepts from Kenelm Burridge (the “redemptive process”) and Antonio Gramsci (“hegemony”).

<sup>68</sup> Bell elaborates on the strategies by which ritual creates redemptive hegemony, explaining that ritual “temporally structures a space-time environment through a series of physical movement thereby producing an arena which, by its molding of the actors, both validates and extends the schemes they are internalizing. It interprets its own schemes as impressed upon the actors from a more authoritative source, usually from well beyond the immediate human community itself. Hence, through an orchestration in time of loosely and effectively homologized oppositions in which some gradually come to dominate others, the social body

assumptions and obligations the ritual order imposes while discharging his or her obligations to it, leaving the ritual with a sense of personal redemption. Bell suggests that ritual “aligns one within a series of relationships linked to the ultimate sources of power,” and that “it always suggests the ultimate coherence of a cosmos in which one takes a particular place. This cosmos is experienced in a chain of states or an order of existence that places one securely in a field of action and in alignment with the ultimate goals of all action” (141), thus providing a sense of security for the participant. Finally, Bell claims that ritual and the strategy of ritualization in general are “particularly effective in situations when the power is claimed to be from God, not from military might or economic superiority”; it is also “a way for people to experience a vision of a community order that is personally empowering” (116). By means of ritual, therefore, immigrants in the midst of the theologizing experience of uprooting, liminality, and marginality in American society at the turn of the twentieth century could turn to ritual as a means of achieving a sense of personal redemption.

While Bell examines the social and psychological strategies by which ritual creates the experience of redemptive hegemony, in *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, ritologist David Kertzer examines the role of ritual in the dynamics of power between large nation states and their own marginalized subcultures. Since rituals carry messages not only to insiders but to outsiders as well, their strategies can be employed by both dominant and marginalized groups to negotiate power relations in subtle and complex ways. In

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reproduces itself in the image of the symbolically schematized environment that has been simultaneously established” (110).

addition, Kertzer argues, “ritual is used to constitute power, not just reflect power that already exists” (25). Thus ritual can be an especially effective tool for reinforcing collective identity and achieving a sense of mastery for groups threatened with dissolution in a larger order. “Lacking the formal organization and the material resources that help perpetuate the rule of the elite,” Kertzer writes, “the politically deprived need a means of defining a new collectivity. This collectivity, created through rituals and symbols, [. . .] provides people with an identity different from that encouraged by the elite” (181). Kertzer maintains that since ritual has the power to bind together multiple political groups, it often happens in large nation states that ritual paradoxically can be used in the political struggles of competing factions and subsocieties at the same time that it is used to uphold nationalism and societal chauvinism (69). This was the case in the United States during the period of social upheaval at the turn of the twentieth century when multiple groups with often sharply contrasting agendas turned to ritual as a means of sustaining collective identity and the individual identities of their members.

The historical record reveals that the period of heaviest immigration was one of political, economic, and cultural instability during which even native-born Americans experienced troubling questions over identity. Of the tensions faced by Americans during the period of immigration, Joseph Cosco writes:

It was the misfortune of the [. . .] new immigrants to seek their promised land in a country then experiencing an “age of anxiety,” when many native-born Americans were nervous and insecure about a host of perceived threats to the nation’s economic, social, cultural, and racial health. American debates over immigration and assimilation would occur in a charged atmosphere of economic

upheaval and recessions, tense race, class, and labor relations, and dizzying social change associated with the late-nineteenth century's rapid advances in industrialization, urbanization, and communication [. . .] Social reform movements and the flood of utopian writings reflected and fed the country's unsettled state and psyche. (11-12)

As a result, immigrants were not the only group for whom ritual eased a sense of uprooting and liminality. The record shows that, even as mainline Protestantism de-emphasized ritual as the relic of a superstitious and divisive religious mindset, a surprising number of native-born Protestants were also engaging in secret rituals of their own, which resulted in an efflorescence of secret societies, all of which engaged in elaborate rituals. The list is long, and the names are often splendid: The Order of the Alhambra, The Foresters, The Good Templars, The Mystic Order of the Veiled Prophets of the Enchanted Realm, Job's Daughters, the Rosicrucians, The Ancient Order of Sciots, The White Shrine of Jerusalem, and The Ancient Arabic Order of Nobles of the Mystic Shrine. William Whalen's *Handbook of Secret Organizations*, which defines such an organization specifically as one that "includes the criterion of a secret ritual and initiation ceremony" (v), provides descriptions of no fewer than forty-seven such groups and states that in the late-nineteenth century more than six hundred were founded (2). Whalen argues that, although secret societies may seem to modern-day Americans as the hobby of eccentrics, they have in fact exerted a major influence in American national life (8).

Many of these organizations, such as the Masons, the Elks, and the Red Men, were fraternal orders that provided a much-needed religious outlet for masculine energies and personal transformation for turn-of-the-century men whose rites of passage had been

neglected in favor of the capitalist project of economic conquest, and whose religious authority had been undermined by women's increased power in the church (Carnes 14). Many others, however, were formed precisely in response to the influx of immigrants. Organizations such as the American Protective Association, the Patriotic League of the Revolution, and the Minute Men of New York City arose in direct opposition to the growth of Irish Catholic populations in eastern cities and to the burgeoning numbers of Polish and Italian Catholic immigrants (Davis 181).<sup>69</sup> Henry Bowers, the founder of the A.P.A, borrowed the black and yellow regalia and elaborate ritual of the Masons and used the lure of exotic ritual to gain as many as half a million members by the late 1890s (Higham 80-1). Alarmed by what they perceived as papal interference in American affairs of state and by the increased power of the immigrant vote, in 1893 the A.P.A disseminated their own "papal encyclical," a document in which the pope supposedly ordered American Catholics to kill all heretics, and spread paranoia about the current economic depression and industrial violence, which they portrayed as part of a papal plot to take over the United States (181). Apparently the A.P.A., a secret ritualistic society, saw no irony in its portrayal of the Roman Catholic Church as a secret ritualistic society intent upon ruling America.

Undoubtedly, the most powerful and the most frightening of these secret societies was the Ku Klux Klan, particularly in its second incarnation, which began to emerge in 1915 in Atlanta, just a few months after the lynching of Leo Frank, the Jewish manager of an Atlanta pencil factory (Higham 186). William Simmons, the founder of the new Ku

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<sup>69</sup> The American Protective Association was founded in 1887, just one year after Josiah Strong had warned of the dangers of "Romanism," which, in its allegiance to the pope, stands in direct opposition to the principles of the American republic, he argues in his immensely popular book *Our Country* (59-88).

Klux Klan, had been a professional joiner of secret societies, and belonged to more than a dozen, including the Knights Templar, the Masons, and the Woodmen of the World (287). He consequently recognized the power of ritual to combat the sense of disenfranchisement that many white southern males experienced in the face of what they perceived as threats to Anglo-Protestant dominance from African-Americans, Jews, Catholics, and immigrants in general. Higham tells us that Simmons's first act as Imperial Wizard was to "draw up the high-sounding ritual of the Kloran, create a galaxy of Kleagles, Kligrapps, Cyclops, Geniis, and Goblins, and summon his little band of followers to Stone Mountain, where they dedicated themselves before a flaming cross and a flag-draped altar to uphold Americanism, advance Protestant Christianity, and generally maintain white supremacy" (287-88).<sup>70</sup>

The Klan's use of symbol and ritual demonstrates the ability of rituals to empower groups who feel themselves to be lacking in other sources of political power. Often, Kertzer notes, groups will rummage through the ritual symbols of older religions and appropriate them for their own purposes (42). This is, in fact, what Simmons did. The Klan adopted numerous symbols drawn from other traditions, including the sacred altar, the fiery cross, hooded robes, the robed horse, the Holy Bible beneath crossed, unsheathed swords, and the flag of the United States (Quarles 66-68). The Klan also

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<sup>70</sup> Just as immigrant writers recognized the dramatic potential of ritual to encapsulate multiple concerns, writer and Ku Klux Klan sympathizer Thomas Dixon also used ritual in his novel *The Clansmen* to portray the drama of the Klan crusade to protect Anglo-Protestant culture from Negro and Northern abuse. Dixon includes a powerful ritual scene in which the Klan meets in a cavern before a high altar, fills a silver flagon with the blood of southern women who were supposedly violated and killed by a Negro man, lights a flaming cross and then extinguishes it in the blood of the victims. This ritual, in turn, incites the Klan to rally in a violent campaign to wrest power from the hands of the ruling black establishment, executing the black man and throwing his body on the lawn of the black Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina (318-328).

engaged in highly stylized and intricate ritual practices as set forth in the Kloran, its book of ritual. Most of the Klan's rituals were created by Simmons and were, like its symbols, adaptations of the rituals of other religions and secret societies.<sup>71</sup>

Even more interesting, however, was the Klan's use of the symbols and rituals of the very groups it despised. Like the A.P.A. who, although anti-foreign in its platform, repeatedly used the symbols of Jewish patriarchy and ancient Middle Eastern religion inherited from the Masons, the anti-Catholic Klan used rituals and ritual objects borrowed from Roman Catholicism. For example, "Klan Water," supposedly "blessed" by the Imperial Wizard, was sold for use in initiation ceremonies for the "baptism" of Klan converts. At the initiation rite, a bottle of Klan Water was placed beside the Bible, the American flag, and two crossed swords (62). Klan Water was even used as "holy" water at some churches (62).

That the elaborate rituals of the Klan were used to empower a group that, like many immigrant groups, perceived itself as vulnerable and marginalized, is born out by the Constitution and Laws of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (Incorporated), published in 1915, which declares its first priority to be protection "of the weak, the innocent, and the defenseless from the indignities, wrongs and outrages of the lawless, the violent and the brutal; to relieve the injured and oppressed; to succor the suffering and unfortunate" (Quarles 220).<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the rituals of all of these organizations, whether fraternal or nativist, served, for better or worse, to create redemptive hegemonies for groups of

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<sup>71</sup> There was a curious interchange between fiction and reality in the ritual construction of the Ku Klux Klan. Dixon's novel portrayed rituals that the original Klan, in fact, never practiced. In turn, the new Klan adopted rituals from the novel. For example, on Thanksgiving Day in 1915, Simmons took his followers to the summit of Stone Mountain outside of Atlanta and engaged in a revival service that included a cross-burning according to the model presented by Dixon in *The Clansman*. According to Chester Quarles, the Stone Mountain ritual was probably the first cross-burning rite performed by the Klan (55).

<sup>72</sup> In Dixon's novel, the Grand Cyclops of the Klan reads these words during the cave ritual.

Americans who perhaps, like the immigrants, also found themselves disinherited and confused by societal changes at the turn of the century and who were perhaps unable to experience a secure sense of personal redemption within mainstream Protestantism or American civil religion. Ironically, and perhaps significantly, the initiation rites of many of these groups placed the initiate in the role of “wayfarer, stranger, pilgrim, intruder, [. . .] alien” (Whalen 5).

On a broader scale, while immigrants and native-born Americans sought to fortify themselves by performing their rites in the transepts of the state cathedral, so to speak, the high altar was reserved for the patriotic rites of American civil religion and the creation of “true Americans.” The mythos of American nationalism itself evolved out of the theologizing experience of immigration undergone by the Puritans and the Enlightenment project to create a citizenry that transcended previous nationalities and ethnicities (Boelhower 17). In order to ensure the dominance of this version of the experience, “a super-identity was projected as the solution to ethnic anarchy” (Boelhower 19), through the introduction of a number of patriotic rituals when the influx of immigrants began to destabilize older notions of the true American. Hobsbawm suggests that “making Americans” was the purpose behind these rituals, particularly those used in connection with national holidays and those in the public schools (280). As noted in a previous chapter, for example, the Pledge of Allegiance was initiated at the time of the Columbiad, along with several other ceremonial events designed around the Columbian myth and the Classical/Christian symbols of American civil religion. Memorial Day services became more elaborate with ritual observances dedicated to mourning the deaths of American soldiers who died in defense of the sacred nation state. With a conscious



agenda to assimilate immigrants in order to avoid threats to American security, the Americanization Day Committee, beginning in 1915, implemented more ritualized naturalization ceremonies and July Fourth celebrations (Higham 244). Patriotic rituals flourished in the private sector as well, as was the case with Henry Ford's English school graduation ceremonies, which included a "baptism" at which immigrants dressed in their native clothes and carrying signs identifying their homelands filed into a huge "melting pot" in the center of the stage out of which another line of men emerged dressed in identical business suits and carrying American flags (248).

Because, according to Hobsbawm, American identity, unlike that of the English or French, was established chiefly by a choice of beliefs, behaviors, and loyalties, that identity had to be maintained by the introduction of rituals that implicitly defined the "un-American" as "an internal enemy against whom the good American could assert his or her Americanism, not least by the punctilious performance of all the formal and informal rituals, the assertion of all the beliefs conventionally and institutionally established as characteristic of good Americans" (280). In accord with the theories of Platvoet, van den Toorn, and Kertzer, ritual was thus an important social and political strategy for determining who should be included within the national identity. This strategy was complicated, however, by a problem that existed for both America and the nation states of Europe in the nineteenth century: a "challenge to the legitimacy of new states and regimes [. . .] chiefly represented, singly or in combination, by the sometimes linked, sometimes competing, political mobilization of masses *through religion (mainly Roman Catholicism)*, class consciousness (social democracy), and nationalism" (Hobsbawm 267, emphasis added). Thus the rituals of immigrant groups, such as Roman Catholic Italians

and Orthodox Jews, appeared to support a set of allegiances that transcended the quasi-religious project of creating a nation of true Americans. Since, as Bell states, the goal of ritual is the “ritualization of social agents” who have internalized schemes which cause them to “reinterpret reality in such a way as to afford perceptions and experiences of a redemptive hegemonic order” (123), when immigrants engaged in their rituals, there was the perceived danger that those rituals might inculcate loyalty to a redemptive hegemony different from that of civil religion, prompting them to remain in the transepts of the state cathedral, refusing to engage in the cult of the nation before the high altar. Kertzer succinctly sums up the problem of immigrant rituals for the assimilationist agenda: “Rites can create and maintain an identity in conflict with the political hegemony” (117).

Immigrant performance of ritual, then, was charged not only with religious but also social and political significance. When immigrant writers presented ritual in their fiction during this period, therefore, they did so in the context of multiple orders using ritual, all of which presented themselves as somehow redemptive, the most dominant one being that devoted to the nationalist agenda. The novels of Bernardino Ciambelli, Edward Steiner, and O.E. Rølvaag employ a variety of strategies involving the use of ritual to reveal the difficulties in negotiating among these competing orders of power within American society. While Ciambelli subordinates Roman Catholic ritual to American nationalism in the context of the Spanish-American War to combat notions of Italians as dangerous to American ideals and to legitimate the Italian community to itself, Steiner uses ritual as a sticking point in his project to validate the Jewish immigrant’s religious heritage apart from Christian religious hegemony. Rølvaag, on the other hand, evokes a

darker and much richer picture of ritual's problematic ability both to enhance and to restrict life.

At the time Ciambelli published *I misteri di Bleeker Street* in 1899, the Italian community in the United States contained a significant number of political exiles, Italian nationalists, radicals, and socialists. Rudolph Vecoli reports that in the mid-nineteenth century, "an intellectual proletariat of doctors, teachers, and journalists," established itself in America, and although it eventually became a minority within the larger southern Italian migration of the late nineteenth century, it "occupied a strategic position in the political and cultural life of the Italian colonies" (223). Many Italians in this early community of intellectuals became known as *mangiapreti* (priest eaters) because of their vehement anti-clericalism. Italian Socialist newspapers such as *Il Proletario*, *La Parola dei Socialisti*, and *L'Unione Italiana* frequently fulminated against the powers of the papacy, calling the pontiff "the Grand Tyrant, the butcher of liberty" (Vecoli 224), and Italian newsstands often displayed antipapal slogans and grotesque caricatures (Vecoli 224). The Italian intellectual community cheered the occupation of Rome in 1870 by Italian troops and continued to celebrate the anniversary of its seizure with parades and dinners, to the indignation of American Catholics who considered their attitude a sacrilege and denounced such Italian nationalist figures as Victor Emmanuel and Garibaldi as "brigands who had stolen the Papal domain" (222).

Even those southern Italians who later arrived professing Roman Catholicism had difficulty in accepting *American* Catholicism. As we have seen, when they reached American soil in the 1880s, many immigrants from the *Mezzogiorno*, having endured injustice at the hands of priests and bishops, had already developed a deep suspicion of

the clergy, which was further enflamed by confrontation with Irish domination of the church, its insistence upon reverence for the clergy, and its contempt for Italian religious practice. Italian Catholics, in unison with other non-Irish Catholic immigrant groups, therefore, increasingly resented what they perceived as a forced agenda of Americanization practiced upon them by the Irish-dominated clergy. To Protestant Americans outside the Catholic and Italian communities, however, the Italian, regardless of divisions within the church, still carried the stigma of Catholicism (which meant, as Josiah Strong expressed in *Our Country*, loyalty to the Pope above all), as well as the tendency to criminality, radicalism, and violence.

The project to Americanize Italian immigrants became more urgent, however, as more and more immigrants poured into the country during the last decade of the nineteenth century and American nationalism became more and more strident. As a result, Americanists like Bishop John Ireland, who perceived the Catholic religious body as an outsider to American society, desperately wanted to be incorporated into the mainstream and thus, along with his project to modernize the Catholic church in America, also promoted a project among immigrants of “filling up of the heart with love for America and for her institutions [. . .] and failing in nothing to prove our attachment to its laws, our willingness to adopt, as dutiful citizens, all that is good and laudable in its social life and civilization” (qtd. in Dolan *The American Catholic Experience* 302).<sup>73</sup> But

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<sup>73</sup> The Vatican identified Americanism with modernism. In the early to mid-nineteenth century, two American Catholic thinkers, Isaac Hecker and Orestes Brownson, introduced ideas of religious liberty, separation of church and state and progressive notions of history that later in the nineteenth century, through the pervasive influence of Darwinism, led to calls for the church to evolve by adapting itself to its new American environment and to visions of a new, reinvigorated Catholicism that could usher in America’s true Manifest Destiny. The implied superiority of American Catholicism over that of the Mother Church in Rome led, in turn, to the Vatican’s determination to reassert its power over the American Church. From the 1880s onward, therefore, a storm of controversy raged within the American Catholic

the Americanization project was a two-edged sword that placed immigrant Catholics between competing demands for loyalty—to the American democratic political order on one hand and the spiritual monarchy seated at the Vatican, which had become concerned about growing forces of modernism among American Catholics, on the other.<sup>74</sup>

In the context of such rivalries, therefore, the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898 was an especially significant event, since it inspired men like Ireland, who saw the war as “a golden opportunity to persuade Vatican authorities that the United States was a power to be reckoned with,” to apply American ideals to the church in Europe (Dolan *The American Catholic Experience* 315). Bishop Ireland launched a campaign in 1899 outlining the ideology of his crusade to transform the Catholic Church to meet the needs of a new age. Across the Atlantic, however, conservatives viewed the war as a battle between revealed tradition and the arrogant self-deception of modernism, with the United States posing a serious threat to the political and theological power of the Mother Church.<sup>75</sup> Thus, Ciambelli’s juxtaposition of Catholic ritual to the nationalist agenda of the Spanish-American War in *I Misteri di Bleeker Street* calls up conflicts between Church and State that would have resonated on many levels with Italian immigrants who were caught between American suspicions of criminality and radicalism,

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Church as liberals and conservatives struggled over the true identity and loyalty of the American Catholic, even as Anglo-Protestants like Josiah Strong engaged in their own debate about the same issues (Dolan *The American Catholic Experience* 306-9).

<sup>74</sup> For example, when a French translation of a biography of Isaac Hecker was published in 1897, inspiring French Republicans to raise cries for increased separation of church and state, French conservatives launched an attack on American forces of modernism in the church with the support of authorities in Rome (315).

<sup>75</sup> Accordingly, the same year, Pope Leo XIII issued *Testem Benevolentiae*, condemning the ideas of the Americanist movement, including its emphasis on active virtues, tolerance of Protestantism, the Church’s need to adapt to the times, and especially the idea that American Catholicism was in any sense superior to European Catholicism. The encyclical effectively ended Ireland’s initiative (316).

Irish Catholic fears of Italian paganism and anti-clericalism, and power struggles between American and European Catholicism within the Roman Catholic church.

*I Misteri*, we will recall, concerns the abduction and supposed murder of Ada Rains, the daughter of Civil War veteran William Raines and his Italian wife. After Ada survives the first attempt on her life and takes up residence with Clara and Enrico Arnoldi in the working-class neighborhood of Bleeker Street, she falls in love with Enrico and the two plan to be married. Ada, however, is not yet safe from the plot to destroy her but is abducted yet again. This time she is taken to a brothel, where she fights off the advances of its lesbian proprietor and comes close to losing her maidenhood to a lascivious old man (211-223). Ada manages to escape, however, and is rescued by the gypsies, who take her, now in a state of shock and amnesia, on their journey to Uruguay and later to Cuba (224-5). When Enrico learns of her disappearance, he searches everywhere, but to no avail. In despair, he prepares to kill himself but is saved at the last minute by the good Italian priest Father Francesco, who convinces him that he must go on living for Ada's sake (282).

At this moment, the novel tells us, increasing political tensions between America and Spain erupt. The *USS Maine* is blown up in Cuban waters, and one hundred U.S. marines die. Everywhere, in theaters and at public events, the national anthem is played amid frenetic expressions of national pride. While the whole country cries for war, Congress gives an ultimatum to the Spanish to free Cuba, which they ignore. Hearing that Teddy Roosevelt has now ordered the formation of a corps of cavalymen that he will command himself, Enrico feels his path is now laid out for him. Instead of ending his life in suicide, he can now offer it in service of America. Ten days later he puts on the

uniform of a Rough Rider and departs under the command of Roosevelt to defend his country and the oppressed in Cuba (334).

Meanwhile, Ada's father, General Rains, who has been unable to move or speak since he was stricken upon hearing of Ada's supposed death, has been taken to Uruguay for a rest cure. While on a riverboat excursion to the port, General Rains, the American Civil War hero, silently watches from his wheelchair as the American battleship *Oregon* prepares for war. When the battleship raises the American flag, Rains is overcome by patriotic fervor. Suddenly, he rises from the chair and cries out "Long live America!" (305). Family and friends look on in disbelief as Rains is miraculously healed. When the *Oregon* pulls up alongside Rains's boat, the crew takes Rains on board, and the captain presents General Rains as the noble hero who was cured by the American flag. The sailors shout "Hurrah!" while the flag is lowered and raised three times and the cannons thunder. Rains's doctor stares dumbfounded at this cure that has eluded his expertise for months (306). The band then plays the national anthem, and no eye is left dry. Paul Messbarger has noted that in American Catholic fiction in the nineteenth century, heroes often pray to St. Anthony, say the rosary, or wear the badge of the Sacred Heart. In particular, he notes that Civil War soldiers often protect themselves from harm with a medal of the Blessed Virgin (140). In Ciambelli's Italian Catholic novel, however, it is the flag, the symbol of American power and ideals, rather than the symbols of the church, that protects and cures the Civil War veteran.

At home in America, Enrico has finally received his orders to ship out with Roosevelt for Santiago. Upon their arrival, Roosevelt has the flag raised while all of the soldiers pass in military review, after which the men are given orders to advance on San

Juan Hill. When Roosevelt asks for a brave volunteer to capture the Spanish cannon, Enrico eagerly comes forward, anxious for a chance to give himself in honor of his country (359). The cannon are on high ground, which will make the task very dangerous, but Enrico insists on leading the company of volunteers, crawling on his belly in the heat and fetid air. The Rough Riders charge in for a heated battle as the Spanish begin firing. As the battle rages, Enrico rushes to the front of the assault and is shot but continues fighting. Through his heroism, the Rough Riders are able to take San Juan Hill. After the battle, when Roosevelt tells his wounded men to go to the field hospital for treatment, Enrico insists that Roosevelt send him back to his post, claiming his wound is only minor (361). Impressed by his patriotism, Roosevelt makes him a captain on the spot, and the whole company cheers Enrico as the hero of San Juan Hill (361).

Enrico continues to fight heroically in hand-to-hand combat as the company attempts to take the town of San Juan. Finally, he is shot in the chest and falls, critically wounded. When the Spanish retreat, they try to take Enrico as a prisoner, but since he shows no signs of life, they wrap him in an American flag and leave him for dead in the shade of a cocoa tree (363). During the night, Enrico regains consciousness and lies cocooned in the flag throughout the tropical night, thirsty and in pain. In another one of the amazing coincidences in the novel, the gypsies who rescued Ada are camping in the area. They discover Enrico and take him to their camp where both Ada and Enrico recover from their physical and psychological wounds when they are reunited (377). The next day, Roosevelt comes to the camp looking for Enrico, for whom he has developed a special fondness. When he sees Enrico, Roosevelt embraces him and tells him this is the most beautiful day of his life. He then has the flag of the regiment brought to Enrico, and,



while all salute, he addresses the flag: “Glorious flag, we believed that you were lost to the hands of the enemy. This thought marred our victory. You have returned to your defenders, carried by him who saved you and baptized you with his blood” (379).

Roosevelt speaks here as the priest of American civil religion, while the blood of an Italian hero becomes the consecrating element in a sacrament of American patriotism. In Ciambelli’s vision, the stain of Italian immigrant blood symbolically sanctifies, rather than pollutes, the American nation.

When General Cervera finally surrenders, the troops are sent home, and Enrico is honored everywhere as a war hero. The most important of these events is that held by the Italian associations at the statue of Columbus on 59<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City, in which Italian and American nationalism are joined as Enrico and other honorees watch Italian soldiers march proudly in an American patriotic celebration. As the band plays the Hymn of Garibaldi, Italian veterans of the Risorgimento, their chests covered with medals, pay their respects to the American hero to general public acclaim (453).

Ciambelli’s continual emphasis on the power of American national symbols for the faithful citizen prepares us for his unusual use of ritual at the end of the novel. After much celebration, the star-crossed Enrico and Ada are finally free to be married at the Church of the Madonna of Pompei, where they process down an aisle “transformed into a true garden of flowers” to the great altar adorned by rich candelabra, while the choir sings a magnificent hymn (455). Before the altar, Father Francesco, “assisted by many priests,” chants the wedding Mass, joins the couple, and blesses the marriage. At the last minute, however, the Catholic ritual and the priestly office are superseded by the sudden arrival of Colonel Teddy Roosevelt, “followed by many officials,” who, as the priest of

American civil religion, gives his own blessing to the marriage of the Spanish-American war hero before the crowd (455). Roosevelt then processes with Enrico and Ada through the streets to cheers and applause and cascades of fresh flowers thrown by the factory workers of Bleeker Street.

In the last lines of the novel, Ciambelli uses the same strategy once more to bolster his Italo-American nationalist platform. The narrative tells us that Ada and Enrico have retired to Italy for a time, with General Rains and the rest of their family, where Ada gives birth to a son. Father Francesco has joined the family in Italy, where, as Ciambelli briefly notes, he baptizes her son according to the rites of the Church. Ciambelli then quickly moves on to the final scene in which the old family servant teaches the tiny boy the art of combat so that he can continue the family's line of American military heroes. Just as Ciambelli gives Roosevelt the final word at the wedding ceremony, he subordinates the Catholic ritual of initiation and redemption to that of American nationalism by overshadowing the Catholic baptismal ritual with the child's initiation into the war games of the American soldier. As the novel concludes, the family exults in having produced "yet another one to fight!" (462).

Thus, in *I Misteri di Bleeker Street*, published the same year that Bishop Ireland launched his Americanist campaign, and just a few years after the A.P.A's "papal encyclical" and the lynching of eleven Italians in New Orleans, Ciambelli uses ritual to maneuver between a complex array of competing redemptive orders and visions of Italian loyalties. First, since Ciambelli was writing for an audience comprised of literate, largely northern Italians, who had not suffered greatly under the Irish/American Catholic project for Americanization, his agenda involved asserting the northern Italian's sense of

legitimacy and pride of place in the American civic order as a means of maintaining an Italian nationalist stance against the powers of the Vatican. Furthermore, the novel creates an immigrant Italian hero who, through his service to America in the Spanish-American War, embodies ideal Italian identity and combats American stereotypes of the Italian as dangerous and disloyal. By depicting an Italian Catholic who is willing to kill Spanish Catholics in the service of America, Ciambelli recreates the image of the Italian as a true patriot and defends the Italian community against suspicions of its loyalty aroused by such documents as the A.P.A's "encyclical." Finally, by having Theodore Roosevelt perform the offices of American civil religion, and by raising its symbols and rituals to a status equal if not superior to Catholicism, Ciambelli subtly offers the American civic order as an antidote to an ecclesiastical power that sought to maintain its hold on immigrant Catholics.<sup>76</sup>

Even more complicated than the array of contending redemptive orders within Little Italy was the kaleidoscope of interpenetrating religious and ideological universes among which Jewish immigrants sought to forge their new identities in America. Orthodox Judaism, Reform Judaism, Zionism, Socialism, Anarchism, Jewish fraternal orders, and even Christianity offered themselves as means to fulfill the newly arrived immigrant's need for inclusion and fulfillment within a meaningful community, an array of choices for which the immigrant was in many ways unprepared because of the restrictions placed upon him in his former life. Howe describes the immigrant's previous life in the *shtetl* as one in which the Jews' only real choice lay between the Sacred and

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<sup>76</sup> Ciambelli's Americanism is not blind, however. In one of several nods to his socialist readers, he describes the outcome of the American victory in the Philippines, saying, "America that declared war to liberate the oppressed, became in turn the oppressor. Strange, the destiny of nations!" (461).

the Profane, and in which the round of ritual observance, combined with the realities of Russian law, inevitably led them to the conclusion that the former was the most desirable (8). Indeed, from the beginning, Jewish identity was largely based upon a separateness achieved, not by a commitment to certain articles of faith, but by a faithful fulfillment of a ritual law that in itself was “paradigmatically expressive of Jewish chosenness” (Frank 4).<sup>77</sup> Consequently, except for those intellectuals who had been exposed to the ideas coming out of the European Enlightenment, most Jews had lived an almost completely collective existence prior to their encounter with American individualism and did not have the same concept of themselves as autonomous beings.<sup>78</sup>

Howe describes the crisis of identity that many of these Eastern European Jews experienced as they were cut adrift from the collective patterns that had previously shaped their identity:

No controlling norms or institutions, neither rabbinical nor communal, could now be accepted as once they had been; no myths of tradition or even slogans of revolt. Those who wanted to remain faithful to traditional Judaism—and in these years many did—had now to make a special effort. Pressures of the city, the shop, the slum, all made it terribly hard to stay with the old religious ethic. The styles

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<sup>77</sup> Frank states, “It is through ritual, not dogma, that Judaism has tended to define itself through the ages” (4).

<sup>78</sup> The *shtetl*, according to Howe, “was a highly formalized society. It had to be. Living in the shadow of lawlessness, it felt a need to mold its life into lawfulness. *It survived by the disciplines of ritual*. The *mitzvot*, or commandments, that a pious Jew must obey, which stated such things as the precise way in which a chicken is to be slaughtered; the singsong in which the Talmud is to be read; the kinds of goods to serve during the Sabbath; the way in which shoes should be put on each morning; the shattering of a glass by the groom during a marriage ceremony—these were the outer signs of an inner discipline. In so heavily ritualized a world *there was little room for individuality as we have come to understand it*, since the community was the manifestation of God’s covenant with Israel” (*World of Our Fathers* 13, emphasis added).

and rituals of traditional Judaism had been premised on a time scheme far more leisurely, a life far less harried than urban America demanded. [. . .] Those immigrants who stood fast by religion found whatever solace it could offer, those who turned to secularism gained the consolations of new theory. But the masses of immigrants who rarely thought to call religion into question yet found it harder and harder to regard it as a system illuminating the totality of existence—what was left to them? Fragments of a culture, a parochialism bred by centuries of isolation, and a heritage of fear, withdrawal, insularity. Except for those who clung to faith or grappled toward ideology, the early immigrants consisted of people who were stranded—stranded socially, morally, psychologically. (70)

Howe's moving description reveals the extent to which Jewish identity was affected by the loss of an environment conducive of ritual observance. Indeed, Nathan Glazer makes explicit the point to which Frank and Howe allude: that the development of Jewish identity in relationship to ritual practice rather than to a body of beliefs may have made Orthodox Jewish immigrants particularly vulnerable to the powerful lure of other redemptive orders.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> In reference to Cahan's David Levinsky, Glazer maintains that "Jews in Eastern Europe, as in Germany, tended to ignore everything that might be considered theology. Only the practices of Judaism were taught. One was brought up to observe the commandments, and, for this reason, as soon as one came in touch with a kind of thought which questioned fundamentals, one was at a loss. In other words, it may be said Jews lost their faith so easily because they had no faith to lose: that is, they had no doctrine, no collection of dogmas to which they could cling and with which they could resist arguments. All they had, surrounding them like an armor, was a complete set of practices, each presumably as holy as the next. Once this armor was pierced by the simple question, Why? it fell away, and all that was left was a collection of habits" (69-70). Mary Antin, who, relates that upon seeing her father break the Law by touching a burning lamp on the Sabbath her whole faith began to evaporate, is another case in point (*The Promised Land* 103-106).

Coming from a culture that had had to adapt to complex social structures throughout its long history of oppression, some Jews attempted to overcome their sense of marginality by simultaneously carrying multiple allegiances and identities. Writer Harry Roskolenko, who sold newspapers on the Lower East Side during this period, later recalled:

[I]deas about God, the synagogue, the union, intermeshed. It was difficult, then, for me to see how men could be two things—like Zionist-anarchists; or Zionists who were also atheists; or Socialists who were Zionists and atheists. It was like a chess game—with no rules [ . . . ] Who was not at least two or three separate spiritual and physical entities on the Lower East Side? My father managed Socialism, Orthodoxy, and Zionism, quite easily, and so did the kibitzers and the serious. (190)

Abraham Cahan, on the other hand, presents a different picture, describing his socialist cohort in a newspaper article as an intransigent group of intellectuals who looked down on ordinary religious Jews and refused to accede to their superstitious practices:

One must not sit at a Seder; one must extend no sympathy to the honest, ignorant mother who sheds tears over her prayer book [ . . . ] In truth, our early unbelievers were, in their own way, just as fanatical, just as narrow minded, just as intolerant as the religious fanatic on whom they warred. (*The Jewish Daily Forward* 22 April 1911)

Cahan's complaint suggests that those Jews who, like the socialists and anarchists, grappled with ideology within the centrifugal forces of the American experience were attempting to define themselves in the ideological marketplace by

differentiating themselves from those who practiced orthodox religion (105). Since ritual practice was so central to Orthodox Judaism, this often meant that radicals focused their rejection of orthodoxy on Jewish ritual itself. Most notable for their bitter antagonism toward Jewish ritual were the anarchists, who placed the religious question at the heart of their zealous critique of the social order. Marcus Ravage recalls being attracted to anarchism because of “the absence of every trace of sect exclusiveness in the movement, at least on its intellectual side” (155), yet “we were all missionaries and some of us were quite genuine bigots” (156). The anarchists often concentrated an unusual amount of energy on the very rituals they had rejected, particularly in their yearly “Yom Kippur Balls,” at which, on the most solemn of Jewish holidays, they would hold parties, parades, stage theatrical performances, and publish parodies of Jewish prayers in their newspapers (105). Howe maintains that these parodies only served to prove how well the anarchists knew their prayers, and that the false bravado of the anarchists only revealed their own sense of abandonment and unrequited longing for the old religious rituals and the haunting beauty of Kol Nidre (106). Thus, deeper than the intellectual defenses put up by those who had been disappointed by religion, “the past remained vivid to those who attacked it as obsolete [. . .] You could denounce the voice of religion as superstition and worse, but the Yom Kippur service shook the heart” (18).

At the same time that Orthodox Jewish immigrants were resisting the attacks of both radicals and Reform Jews on their religious practice, they were also besieged by Christian missionaries who stood on the corners of the crowded streets of the religious marketplace on the Lower East Side, waiting to offer them, sometimes quite aggressively,

yet another redemptive community through which to create a new American identity.<sup>80</sup> Evangelicals believed, contrary to traditional Christian views, that Christianity was not the *alternative* to Jewish identity but the *fulfillment* of Jewish identity (Ariel 15). Thus, along with their policy of providing relief services to poor immigrants, they evolved a set of cultural and theological strategies aimed at appealing to Jewish tradition in order to make Christianity less disruptive to Jewish experience. They climbed onto wagons and preached on the street corners in Yiddish while distributing Yiddish tracts. More significantly, missions deliberately appealed to Jewish sensibilities by limiting their use of specifically Christian symbols and decorating their mission houses instead with Jewish symbols, even going so far as to hold Christian services on Saturdays in order to reduce Jewish anxiety over neglecting their Sabbath obligations (16).<sup>81</sup> In addition, evangelical journals like *Our Hope, Prayer and Work for Israel*, and *Immanuel's Witnesses* continually published articles on the significance of Jewish rituals and of the Jewish people to Christian history (15-16).

The reaction of Jews to Christian efforts to proselytize their co-religionists was generally one of indignation. Irving Howe observes that few Christian agencies

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<sup>80</sup> The Christian evangelical project in the Jewish ghetto had antecedents in missions to Jews during the early 1800s, but until the 1880s, when Orthodox Jews began pouring into the streets of the Lower East Side, little time had been spent on Jewish conversion (Ariel 9). The catalyst for the explosion of interest in evangelizing the Jews was the rise of a premillennial dispensationalist belief among Protestants after the Civil War, which taught that Christ would only return to earth after the Jews were restored to Israel and 144,000 Jews had accepted Christ as the Messiah. According to Biblical prophecy, when the Jews establish a nation in Palestine, they will endure a time of great suffering under the Antichrist during which the previously converted 144,000 Jews will lead their brothers and sisters to full acceptance of Christ as the Messiah. At this point Christ will return to the earth to set up his kingdom in which the Jews will then serve as his governors (Ariel 10). As a consequence of this belief, beginning in the 1870s, evangelical Protestants took a keen interest in the Jewish people and Zionist activities. In the 1890s, the Hope of Israel mission began working to spread the gospel to Jews on the Lower East Side (Ariel 9). By the time World War I began, there were more than two hundred Jewish converts working as evangelists to proselytize the Jews (45). While some scholars argue that such Protestant efforts were actually aimed at assimilating Jews into mainstream American culture, Yaakov Ariel maintains that such arguments fail to recognize the power of dispensationalist belief within the movement (12).

<sup>81</sup> Ezra Brudno's *The Fugitive* contains a scene in which a Jewish convert uses Jewish mealtime rituals in his attempts to convert the novel's protagonist Israel Russikoff to Christianity (345).



supporting the missions realized how deeply their actions offended the feelings of the Jews. For many Eastern European immigrants, such tactics recalled bitter memories of forced conversions in Russia (73-74). Convinced that in their form of Judaism they had achieved a rational monotheism that was itself the model of a future universal American religion, German-speaking Reformed Jews felt no need to cast aside their own tradition (59), and found in the missionary agenda a challenge to what they considered to be their rightful place within the American civil redemptive order (68).

For this reason, Jewish converts who became missionaries were often the most reviled by Jews as “traitors twice over,” who had not only abandoned their faith but were attempting to entice other Jews to do the same (60). Some Jewish missionaries had personal failings that made it easy for the Jewish community to defend itself by exposing them as frauds.<sup>82</sup> Those Jewish converts who claimed to have been former rabbis posed a much greater problem. The only means of defense in such cases was to cast aspersions upon their biographies.<sup>83</sup> The traditional Jewish attitude to apostasy can be best

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<sup>82</sup> Reverend Jacob Frehsman was one of the first to proselytize on the Lower East Side in the late 1880s. He was later followed by Hermann Warszawiak, the son of a Polish rabbi, whose oratorical skills were powerful but whose moral fiber was questionable. Howe reports that Warszawiak was especially hated in Jewish streets, and that the Yiddish press accused him of buying converts. Warszawiak solicited funds from wealthy Protestant patrons for the construction of a large building to be called “Christ’s Synagogue and Jewish Missionary Training School,” but he never got around to building it (73).

<sup>83</sup> This was the case with Leopold Cohn, one of the most controversial figures among Jewish missionaries, who operated the Williamsburg Mission under the auspices of the American Baptist Home Mission Society. Cohn claimed to have been born in Hungary and to have been ordained a rabbi at eighteen, after which he left for America, where he converted to Christianity. Cohn maintained that he then studied theology at Edinburgh. Jewish opponents countered with claims that Cohn was actually an orphan who later became a saloonkeeper and who fled to America from charges of forgery (28-9). Whatever the true story may have been, Cohn wrote excellent English and was exceptionally knowledgeable about Christian theology and scripture. He was also gifted at negotiating large contributions from wealthy American patrons who wanted to convert the Jews (29). Although he was despised by many of his own people, he created one of the largest missions to the Jews in America and succeeded in converting far more than any other mission in the 1890s and 1910s (30). Cohn was a proud Jew, who retained Jewish practices in his own household and “openly declared that he did not wish for converted Jews to assimilate and disintegrate into the general Christian society” (33). Ariel suggests that Cohn’s Williamsburg mission was successful

understood in the literal translation of the Jewish word for an apostate: *meshumed*—literally, “one who has destroyed himself.” Ariel claims that most Jews considered converts to be “the scum of the earth, the rotten fruit on the Jewish tree, picked by the enemies of Judaism, who were unable to reach any of the good fruit” (64). While most Jewish families did not cut off their Christian members completely, many did sit *shivah* for them, and their conversion placed great emotional strains on family relationships (46). Ultimately, the Christian concept of creating a new identity through individual choice struck at the core of Jewish conceptions of ethno-religious identity, which was believed to be determined at birth and collectively reinforced by the rituals and *mitzvot* of the Torah, through the fulfillment of which “the Jew engages in his own self-realization” (Golding 236)<sup>84</sup>

Jewish converts who were most susceptible to the Christian message were generally those young, single, Orthodox males who sought “new moral and communal frameworks” that would enable them to establish an identity in the new world (Ariel 15). Since, as Glazer notes, Orthodox Judaism, with its emphasis on ritual observance, did not provide the answers many young Jewish immigrants needed in the unsettling and emotionally challenging experience of adjusting to a secular society, many, like Edward

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because of its ability to negotiate between the two redemptive orders of Christianity and Judaism without injuring the dignity of either one.

<sup>84</sup> Abraham Cahan published a fascinating story about a Jewish convert to Christianity entitled “The Apostate of Chego-Chegg” (1899), which recounts the tale of Rivka, a Jewish woman who embraces Christianity in order to marry the man she loves, but who, in the process, loses her family ties and becomes lonely and isolated. Longing to return to her Jewish community and the religious practices that had previously supported her identity, she tries to go home to reconnect with her family but cannot because she loves her husband too much to renounce him in accord with her family’s wishes. Rivka winds up a wandering, tormented soul who has lost her place in the world. Thus, Cahan, though a secular Jew, implicitly recognizes the pain associated with the loss of Jewish identity in presenting Rivka according to the traditional Jewish model of the *meshumadeste*, the one who has destroyed herself.

Steiner, found strength in the embrace of Christianity (Ariel 58).<sup>85</sup> Yet, such conversions, while perhaps providing possible answers to questions of identity in America, did not always provide an experience of peace, since family relations became quite strained in the process. The choice to convert thus often carried with it intense emotional upheaval, as the personal statements of Jewish converts indicate. Edward Steiner's memory of his decision to convert suggests the agony associated with attempting to overcome a sense of homelessness through allying oneself with a redemptive hegemony one's family saw as a threat to the survival of the Jewish people:

I tried to find a way through the confusion of ideas and the mixture of motives [. . .] It was [. . .] mental and physical torture. At the one end of it the mother who bore me in bodily and mental agony; at the other end this homeless and useless self [. . .] Then too, I had a horror of the so-called converted Jew, who often changes his faith for convenience. (*From Alien to Citizen* 213-218)<sup>86</sup>

Jewish convert Henry Hellyer recalls his decision as equally guilt-laden: "I could see my mother and my sister and brother looking at me in terror, and my townspeople pointing their fingers at me in their rage; I could hear the entire Jewish race shouting at me in true fury" (qtd. in Ariel 40). For some, the decision bore too great an emotional cost, leading to a debilitating inner conflict and a confusion regarding their true identity that caused

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<sup>85</sup> In *The Fugitive*, Ezra Brudno presents a Jewish convert who describes his former religion as "that old Judaism with its mystic ceremonies, and absurd formalities. A pure monotheistic belief, shrouded in a cloud of ceremonies and symbols may be beautiful but it is by no means tenacious on the human mind" (346).

<sup>86</sup> Steiner's reference to the "so-called converted Jew" reflects the practices of some Jews who coped with their difficulties and the pressure tactics of Christian missionaries by "converting" multiple times, with different organizations, in exchange for food, clothing, and even money. Ezra Brudno depicts such a character in *The Fugitive* (367-8).

many to retract their conversions (51). Ariel suggests that while “conversion was a radical move” that subverted many traditional Jewish values and placed younger Jews in conflict with their parents, it “put them in even greater conflict with themselves” (40), as they wrestled with their twin desires for inclusion in the evangelical community and for retention of some sort of identity within Judaism (47). This, in turn, led to dilemmas over how to maintain Jewish heritage and which of its formal aspects they could retain (47).

Ironically, the issue of Jewish ritual, the very backbone of Jewish identity became, in turn, a central focus for questions of Christian identity. In 1903, the Hebrew Christian Alliance, a group of Jewish Christians, held its first meeting at Mountain Lake Park, Maryland, out of a desire to evangelize their people whom they believed had a special identity within Christianity as “mediators between the church, the Christian faith and the Jews” (48). Within this group, as was the case within the missionary movement as a whole, there were some who believed that Jews should retain their ritual practice, while others saw it as detrimental to Jewish hopes of achieving a real place within the Christian redemptive order (19). Although it could bolster Jewish comfort with Christian religious practice, once again ritual, with its boundary-producing strategies, became a stumbling block to the larger evangelical project of subsuming Judaism under Christianity. While some non-Jewish evangelicals supported the idea that Jews should retain their ritual practice and should not have to blend in with the gentile Christian community (there were even a few small congregations of Jews who did retain their ritual observance and were called “Messianic Jews”), the majority of Christians felt that it was not admissible to combine Christian faith with Jewish ritual, a belief they often justified by references to a fundamental difference they perceived between Judaism and

Christianity in Paul's admonition that it was futile to observe the law when one had been given the gift of grace (49). In addition, the idea of maintaining their distinct Jewish liturgical heritage was frightening to Jewish converts who believed that they had to demonstrate their sincerity and loyalty by strict adherence to Christian norms in order to avoid resentment, suspicion, and even rejection by the non-Jewish evangelical community (49-50). Thus conversion to Christianity generally meant assimilation into mainstream American culture.

Ultimately, however, the most powerful lure of American culture for immigrants probably lay, not in its Christian religion, but in its invitation to material success. At the turn of the century, an Eastern European Jewish bourgeoisie arose, as many immigrants like David Levinsky chose the path of the "allrightnik" not only as a means of survival but as a way of becoming American, a way to overcome the liminality and marginality of immigrant life. Yet, such a path did not necessarily yield the sense of personal reclamation within a social group that the immigrant sought. One Jewish immigrant by the name of Louis Borgenicht, who may have influenced Cahan's conception of his protagonist, started out with a pushcart and dreams of owning his own store, eventually working his way into the clothing business and gaining great success by underselling German Jews. In the early days of his prosperity, he remained attached to the culture of the Lower East Side, sharing his riches with poor Jews, sending his sons to Hebrew school, keeping a kosher home, and closing his factory on the Sabbath. But, over time, change set in. Borgenicht joined an uptown Hungarian synagogue, struggled to get rid of his Yiddish accent, and hired a tutor to teach his children German. In the end Borgenicht, though visibly successful, found himself a stranger to both worlds and to himself (Howe

161). Thus, “insofar as [the Jews] accepted the secular cultures of their time, they risked the loss of historical identity, a rupture with that sacred past which could stir the skeptics almost as much as the believers” (18).

Edward Steiner’s novel *The Mediator* repeatedly uses ritual moments to mark the passages of one such Jew who throws off his historical identity out of religious enthusiasm rather than materialism only to realize the importance of the sacred past. In the course of these passages, he must make agonizing choices. As discussed in the previous chapter, Samuel Cohen grows up in the environment of Orthodox Judaism, where ritual is strictly observed but other human values such as aesthetics and the content of faith are not given equal importance. Following the pattern described by Glazer, Samuel becomes entranced by the beauty of Catholic ritual and the inspiring ideal of Christian love, only to desert his father in order to become a Catholic monk and a priest. When he returns to his village after fourteen years to celebrate his first communion, he sparks a terrible pogrom that results in destruction and death in the Jewish quarter. Afterward, in a crucial scene, now completely broken and disillusioned, Samuel prepares to leave for America. As he walks out of his village, he enters the cemetery where his mother is buried to say goodbye. Standing before his mother’s grave, he hears the distinctive chime of the church bell signaling the time to say the *Angelus*, a Catholic ritual that reenacts the angel Gabriel’s encounter with the Virgin Mary three times daily in honor of the Incarnation. At various points in the ritual, the Hail Mary is recited. Since Samuel has engaged in this ritual devotion for fourteen years, his lips automatically begin to mouth the words “Hail, Mary! Full of grace,” but at this moment “something seemed to give way within him, as if a dried-up spring had suddenly received back its ceaseless

flow, and he cried out, almost defiantly, the prayer of the Jewish mourner: ‘Yisgadal, Yiskadash, Schmeh raboh’ (130). In this moment, Jewish ritual breaks the redemptive hegemony imposed by Christian ritual and asserts its own power.

Having witnessed the atrocities committed by Christians against the very people through whom the Word of God became incarnate, Samuel is now no longer the same person who previously said the *Angelus* without fail. If rituals proclaim that “we are as we act,” as Jennings suggests, then for Samuel to say the *Angelus* at this point would be to falsify his very being. Samuel’s identity has undergone a radical shift. Since Samuel now perceives the redemptive hegemony maintained by Christian ritual as that of a cruel and oppressive elite, its ability to affirm his former identity is now defunct. In his recoil from the ritual enactment of the Christian mystery of the Incarnation, Samuel in a sense becomes *reincarnated* as a Jew, which means he must make a choice between redemptive orders. Consequently, Samuel stops the Christian ritual prayer, choosing instead to say Kaddish, the Jewish ritual prayer for the dead, over his mother’s grave. As Kertzer suggests, the ritual empowers a sense of identity in Samuel over against that of the elite. The symbolism of his choice of rituals further indicates that Samuel now symbolically chooses to return to the Jewish matrix out of which he sprang by choosing his flesh-and-blood Jewish mother over the Blessed Mother of Catholicism and the Mother Church. Steiner tells us that the tones of the prayer were “notes of defiance [. . .] rather than those of comfort,” emphasizing the political choice between redemptive orders that Samuel is making in this exchange of rituals. From this moment on, Samuel, despite his unwavering love for Christ, will no longer identify himself as a Christian but as a Jew.

While on his journey to America, Samuel meets the Bruce family, wealthy Protestants whose mission it is to convert the Jews in expectation of the Second Coming. Mr. Bruce and his daughter take a keen interest in Samuel, seeing that he would be of great use to their program as a Jewish missionary. However, even though he is in love with the lovely young Jane Bruce and longs for the comfort and sense of personal redemption he used to receive from Christianity, Samuel now completely refuses to accept the role of Christian. Instead, he takes on a much more difficult identity that situates him on the margins of both Christianity and Judaism—that of a Jew who recognizes Christ as the Messiah, a figure he now identifies only by the name of Love. In a manner similar to that indicated by the historical record, Samuel attempts to carry multiple allegiances, a project that puts him immediately at odds with both Jews and Christians.

For example, when he comes upon Mr. Bruce, who is preaching with a Jewish missionary from a wagon adorned with banners displaying Bible verses written in Hebrew letters, Samuel notices that the men are surrounded by an angry mob that accuses the Jewish missionary of having been baptized for money. When the Jewish man tells them in Yiddish that Jesus is the Prince of Peace, the mob angrily asks why Christians attack Jews if their Messiah is the Prince of Peace. Just then, a newsboy calls out the headlines of the latest edition of the news: The Massacre at Kishinev. This pushes the crowd over the edge. They begin throwing stones at the two missionaries and tearing down the banners from the wagon. Samuel jumps onto the wagon to defend the two men and faces the crowd, identifying himself as a Jew and insisting that the mob leave the two men alone. But the crowd furiously condemns him as a Jewish apostate. Another member



of the crowd shouts out that Samuel himself is a baptized Jew, a traitor who deceptively converts Jews to Christianity by calling Jesus by the name of Love. Samuel cries out three times, “I am not a Christian” (248-9). At this, his father, who is standing in the crowd with Dr. Roznik also cries out in joy at what he believes is the return of the son whom he considered dead to the religion of his fathers. But immediately thereafter, Samuel continues: “I am a Jew! In every fiber of my soul a Jew! But, men of Israel, I believe that Jesus is the Messiah” (249). At this, Samuel’s father collapses in grief, and the crowd stones Samuel until he lies unconscious in the street.

Ironically, Samuel’s loyalty to the Jewish Christ places him outside the Christian community as well. When the Bruces take the injured Samuel into their home, he lies semi-conscious for several days, confessing his guilt and confusion in his delirium: “Tateleben Tate, my father, my father! I am a Jew, yes I am a Jew. Forgive me, father, Christ forgive me! Oh! Mother of God, pray for me! No, no!” (256). Dr. Roznik confides in Jane about Samuel’s condition, explaining to her that Samuel is physically exhausted by the heavy work in America and emotionally exhausted from his quest for an identity through his spiritual struggle. Dr. Roznik diagnoses Samuel as a man whose head injury will improve with time but whose heart will never recover, since he is suffering from *Affectionitis Judaica*, “an old disease, as old as Abraham, and there is no cure for it” (257). Dr. Roznik perceives that Samuel is attempting to work out his salvation in a secular society that has neither time nor sympathy for a man’s spiritual struggles. He

compares the immigrant's love of America to the love of a man for a lion that is swallowing him—"he has no choice in the matter" (258).<sup>87</sup>

When Samuel finally regains his strength, Mr. Bruce approaches him about becoming a Christian missionary to the Jews, but Samuel refuses, saying, "I can't wipe out of my own soul Israel's ancient battle-cry: 'Hear! Oh Israel! The Lord thy God is one God!' and I will not, and cannot, wipe it out of Israel's consciousness" (286). When Mr. Bruce accuses him of being a Unitarian rather than a Christian, Samuel expresses his sense of being stripped of all former categories of identity as he calmly replies, "I don't know what I am, Mr. Bruce. I only know that I love this Christ, born of my race, and that I cannot think of my life without Him. I shall preach Christ. I shall live Him if I can—and as I can, and take upon myself the consequences. [. . .] I am a Jew—but I am more than that—I am a human being! Christ has made me that!" (286). In this statement, Samuel denies that Christianity is the fulfillment of Jewish identity, while also affirming Christ, apart from the Christian hegemonic order, as the fulfillment of *human* identity.

Two years pass. Samuel has succeeded in opening a mission house in the Jewish ghetto that works in the marginal space between Christianity, Judaism, and Socialism. After he endures a period of abuse by the community, Samuel's commitment to the relief of suffering wins over the hearts of all three groups. He becomes renowned for his selfless service to the ghetto and succeeds in building a new hospital for its poor. But Samuel's father wanders miserable and alone through the same ghetto, lamenting not only the son who has destroyed himself but also the increasing secularization of Jewish

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<sup>87</sup> In an interesting parallel, Josiah Strong used the same metaphor with a completely opposite intention in his chapter on the perils of immigration in *Our Country*. Strong compares America's unwilling reception of hordes of immigrants to a lion who "without being consulted as to time, quantity or quality, is having the food thrust down his throat, and his only alternative is, digest or die" (58).

life in America, where Jewish businesses remain open on the Sabbath and Jewish children now confuse the ritual practice of Yom Kippur with that of Passover (233). Abraham Cohen walks through the streets on the Sabbath, lamenting the loss of the ritual observances that have been sacrificed to the American custom of milling about and displaying one's finery (236).<sup>88</sup> He now copies Jewish scripture in elegant calligraphy onto scrolls that no one will read, bitterly brooding over his son's apostasy.

Through the final ritual scene in the novel, however, Steiner achieves Samuel's reconciliation with his father and, to some degree, with his religious heritage. One day, as the old man wanders the streets, some hoodlums attack him. When Samuel sees his father's bleeding form carried into his new hospital, he is overcome with grief and longs to be reconciled with him. Abraham Cohen briefly regains consciousness on Yom Kippur, feebly insisting on fulfilling his priestly duties for the solemn holy day. A friend brings his bag with the ram's horn and the grave clothes required by the rite. Samuel comes to him, and the two are finally reunited. Having received kindness at the hands of the Christians who have rescued and treated him, Abraham now has a vision of their old village of Kottowin, where the creek that used to divide the Christian and Jewish quarters is now gone. As his life ebbs away, Abraham draws the prayer-mantle from his bag and spreads it over his son's shoulders. He then instructs Samuel in folding his hands and lifting them above his head, and Samuel obeys "as if moved by a mechanical and

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<sup>88</sup> Marcus Ravage's description of the decline of Jewish devotion on the Lower East Side throws the figure of Abraham Cohen into even sharper relief: "Cut adrift suddenly from their ancient moorings, they were floundering in a sort of moral void. Good manners and good conduct, reverence and religion, had all gone by the board . . . The ancient racial respect for elders had completely disappeared [. . .] Tottering grandfathers had snipped off their white beards and laid aside their skull-caps and their snuff-boxes and paraded around the streets of a Saturday afternoon with cigars in their mouths, when they should have been lamenting the loss of the Holy City" (79).

irresistible force” (354). Then Abraham asks Samuel to chant with him the great blessing upon Israel, which they intone together: “May He bless thee, the Eternal One, and preserve thee, may He make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. May He lift up His face unto thee and give thee peace” (355). Abraham falls back crying faintly for someone to blow the ram’s horn. The horn sounds, “a wild weird note, a note of pain—Israel’s historic note—the note of sacrifice. And with that sound Reb Abraham’s soul was wafted to its maker” (355).

In the ritual of Yom Kippur, father and son experience atonement, and Samuel receives the mantle of priesthood from his father. Samuel’s return to Jewish ritual once again signifies his solidarity with politically deprived Jews who needed collective empowerment within the lion’s mouth of American assimilation as well as a sense of distinction within the competitive religious marketplace. The scene, coming as it does after a period of intense psychological anguish on the part of Samuel, reveals, perhaps, Steiner’s own *Affectionitis Judaica* and his longing to be redeemed from his own guilt at having chosen Christianity over his patriarchal heritage. But Samuel now wears the mantle, not simply of Jewish priesthood, but of a new priesthood that will chant a blessing upon America as a new Zion and mediate between Christians and Jews by consenting to suffer the dialectic between the two communities.

The strains placed on the immigrant soul by competing claims of multiple redemptive orders as exemplified in the conflicts between Christians and Jews amid the secularizing influences of the Lower East Side are recapitulated between Catholics and Protestants in *Their Fathers’ God* (1931), the final book of O.E. Rølvaag’s trilogy, which focuses on a family dilemma over ritual aroused by conflicting worldviews at the heart of

Lutheranism, nineteenth-century devotional Catholicism, and American secularism on the Dakota prairie. When the thoroughly secular Peder Holm marries the devoutly Catholic Susie Doheny and brings her to live with his equally pious Lutheran mother, Rölvaag presents the reader with the national problem of creating unity in diversity through a family insolubly triangulated by the demands of three competing redemptive orders, no single one of which can suffice for the others, yet each of which excludes the others. In addition, Rölvaag uses this conflict over ritual to assert the importance to human life of learning how to live simultaneously in two equally necessary but often contrary modes—the rational and the poetical.

The Catholic Church to which Susie Doheny belongs, according to Jay Dolan, was essentially an immigrant church that saw itself as an outsider to a culture it viewed as hostile to Catholicism, decadent in its secularism, and dangerous in its anti-authoritarian impulse (*The American Catholic Experience* 222).<sup>89</sup> In response, Roman Catholic officials attempted to shore up the church's defenses against both American and European assaults on its authority through such measures as the Declaration of Papal Infallibility in 1870 and the promotion of a devotional Catholicism that reinforced the powers of the church through an emphasis on ritual practice. Dolan describes the Catholicism of the nineteenth century as characterized by four important features: a culture of authority, an emphasis on sin, a sense of the miraculous, and a preoccupation with public and private ritual practice that encouraged the belief that "the divine was accessible only through ritual" (231).

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<sup>89</sup> Dolan states, "Catholics grew up believing Protestants were a 'perishing and debauched multitude of heretics and infidels', and were continually urged to avoid contact with them. Consequently, many Catholics grew up never knowing any Protestants" (228).

Whether or not such belief was completely orthodox, it was in the public performance of rituals like the Mass, baptisms, weddings, and funerals, and in private devotions like the Rosary and devotions to the Sacred Heart, that immigrant Catholics were able to define themselves as Catholics in the United States through the fulfillment of obligations seen as divinely ordained within a redemptive order that transcended a society by which they were considered outsiders (231). Of the symbiosis of ritual, ethnicity, and religion in the development of immigrant Catholic identity, Dolan states:

Devotional Catholicism thus became a means of social identity; it gave people a specifically Catholic identity in a Protestant society. Certainly ethnicity, or one's nationality, was a vital trademark with which both the first and second generation identified. But religion was such an essential part of ethnic identity that, in the United States, religious affiliation became the "organizing impulse" among immigrants. (238)

The rituals of devotional Catholicism, however, supported a culture and ethos that often contrasted sharply with the traditionally masculine values of individual freedom, progressivism, and rationality embraced by the liberal American Protestantism and civil religion of the period. Devotional Catholicism was marked by what Dolan calls "emotionalism and sentimentalism" (231), fostered values of docility and submission, displayed an uncritical acceptance of supernatural cures and miracles, and utilized an array of religious items, such as prayer cards, statues, scapulars, saints' pictures, and religious imagery in general, that were associated with the realm of the feminine at the turn of the twentieth century (231). In *Roads to Rome*, Jenny Franchot describes at length the ways in which gender conflicts were conflated with religious conflicts as American

Protestants confronted what they perceived as Catholic transgression of traditional gender norms in celibate male and female bodies and in the “feminized” depiction of male religious devotion. Thus, nineteenth-century Catholic religiosity challenged many mainstream American notions of religious, behavioral, and sexual norms.

Yet, devotional Catholicism was an especially powerful milieu for *immigrant* Catholics for a number of reasons. On the most basic level, as previously mentioned, the church fostered this type of Catholicism as a means of strengthening reliance on the clergy during a period in which the powers of the church were being challenged. Further, advances in the printing industry allowed for wide dissemination of written devotional material, and the use of the vernacular in private devotions empowered Catholics who were otherwise at the mercy of the Latin-speaking clergy (238). On a deeper level, however, the elevation of suffering to a high level of spiritual significance in devotional Catholicism gave expression and meaning to immigrant suffering; its culture of the miraculous allowed immigrant Catholics to experience the hand of God in their lives; and its ritual practice created a redemptive order that empowered a group who, while making up the religious majority numerically, experienced itself as a cultural minority that endured ethnic and religious discrimination in a society that considered religious belief an essential component of American identity (239).

The Norwegian Lutheran Church in America, on the other hand, though upholding its doctrinal inheritance in its allegiance to the inerrancy of scripture and strict adherence to the confessional writings of the church (Lovoll 144-5), was marked by controversy almost from the beginning, as Lutherans, now freed from the secular authority of the state church of Norway sought to create an authentic Lutheran church in

America (143). Odd Lovoll describes this transition from state-church to free-church as “fraught with deep disharmony from the beginning,” much of which was exacerbated by “an almost undisciplined sense of freedom and opposition among the immigrants” (144), as they came in contact with the sectarian impulse within American religious life. The result was almost continuous conflict over doctrine, practice, organization, and language as the church endured splits and new formations on the prairie (143). Unlike the Catholic Church in America, which experienced perhaps too great an oversight by the Vatican, the Lutheran Church often felt like the orphaned daughter of the mother church in Norway, receiving little interest or guidance from the homeland (143). Nevertheless, despite abandonment by the mother church and dissension within their own church body, many Norwegian Lutherans saw their project of establishing a “Lutheran Zion” as a glorious work requiring a vigorous application of religious values to the transformation of civil life, something that had not been possible in Norway. “Here,” one Lutheran wrote to his pastor, “our weak voice is not a voice in the wilderness; here there is no fruitless speculation and theologizing while everything remains nicely as it was, but here all public speaking becomes action and takes shape and is changed into practice!” (qtd. in Lovoll 144).

Peder Holm, raised in the Lutheran Church on the prairie, and in the American common school, is thus the recipient of a double impetus to strive for the transformation of the public sphere. Peder, who once held long conversations with God as a child, has relinquished what he sees as puerile superstition in favor of common sense, science, and the skepticism he finds in the writings of Thomas Paine and Robert Ingersoll, which he promotes with an energy that borders on religious fervor (91-3). Peder now sees religious



devotion, which he has experienced as oppressive in his mother's pietistic practices, as the province of women and children whose lives are predicated upon fear, a view that becomes even more pronounced when he encounters his wife's unquestioning devotion to Catholic ritual. With his new practical vision, Peder views the stories of the Bible not as existential parables told in poetic language but as purblind "fish stories," spun by the clergy to subjugate human energy to their stifling code of moral behavior. Having turned his eyes away from the heavenly world as an illusion, Peder now concentrates his energies on what he envisions as an American, and essentially masculine, project of building the new country through devotion not to religion, the occupation of "old women," but to the national ideals of freedom of conscience and progress (56). Like his father, Peder views the past as salt on the wings he would use to fly into the glorious American future. "No matter where we've come from," Peder explains,

we all have the same job—to push together for the goal that mankind has been seeking ever since it was morning the first day. Our task is here to build up a happiness so great and so wonderful that the glory of it will brighten up the far corners of the world. But before we can hope to reach the goal we've got to clear the road of a lot of worm-eaten barriers. I mean all those silly superstitions and prejudices that centuries ago should have been dumped into the sea. These prairies will never be beautiful until we finish the job. (55)

Peder's newfound ideology leads him to speak out at a town meeting against the town's gullibility in employing a rainmaker to end a prolonged period of severe drought, to preach a new gospel of common sense whenever he is given the opportunity, and to ridicule the town priest Father Williams, who is dear to his wife, as a humbug. Now the

subject of gossip and ridicule for having impregnated and married a Catholic girl, Peder endures Lutheran taunts that he will forsake the Lutheran church and become Catholic, only to return to the farm and work feverishly while dreaming of personal fulfillment outside the church as a statesman in the American civil realm.

Beret Holm, widowed and aging, has now turned the farm over to her son and lives with Peder, Susie, and their newborn son Petie, whom she adores, having for the most part reconciled herself to Peder's marriage to a Roman Catholic Irish girl.<sup>90</sup> No longer tormented by her former psychological demons but still melancholy, she lives a quiet, sober, and pious life, seeking only to be of service to her son and to maintain the cultural and spiritual connections of the family to the past and to each other. Beret does mourn her son's loss of his spiritual roots and his access to the deeper truths of life, which she feels can only be imparted through the poetic symbols and practices of his religious heritage. In one particularly telling moment that encapsulates the divide between Peder and his mother, Peder has just come from his friend Tambur Ola's house where the two men have been complaining about the failure of superstitious religion to grasp the simple commonsense truth that human beings need only to be kind to one another in order to create the Kingdom of Heaven, and he steps onto the porch of the house where his mother sits watching the sunset. Out of the twilight, she says quietly, "Tonight the hand of God is painting beautifully" (98).

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<sup>90</sup> R  lvaag's trilogy suggests that there were indeed tensions and competition between the Irish and the Norwegians on the prairie. In the beginning of the first book *Giants in the Earth*, Per Hansa removes the landmarks of a group of Irish immigrants, suggesting that there was a question about which group would dominate the region. In *Peder Victorious*, Beret moves Peder to a different school to get him away from the Irish and continually discourages Peder's friendship with Charlie Doheny and his sister Susie. That these tensions were real is attested to by the fact that the anti-Catholic A.P.A. movement in the Midwest was in large part made up of Scandinavians (Desmond 9).

Susie, who like her mother-in-law Beret, conceived her first child out of wedlock, enters the Holm household with the worldview instilled in her by devotional Catholicism and continually suffers the pangs of conscience brought on by her failure to conform to Catholic models of female purity, her marriage to a Protestant, and her subsequent neglect of the rites and sacraments of the Church.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, living in a Norwegian home for the first time, Susie is alienated by a culture she perceives as cold, rigid, and overly punctilious, and by a language to which she must continually listen but cannot understand. Thus she turns to the rituals and symbols of the Roman Catholic Church, especially her devotions to the Virgin Mary, for emotional support and a sense of personal redemption in order to maintain her own identity and to relieve her feelings of loneliness and spiritual failure.

Peder, however, views these rituals and symbols with scorn as manipulative tools of the clergy, impediments to human freedom and social progress. For example, he calls the crucifix and font of holy water Susie installs in their bedroom “idolatry” (199), Susie’s confessions and communions “skullduggery” (148), her rosary “black magic” (23), and the Virgin Mary “an old witch up in the sky” (222), causing Susie to say the rosary in private when Peder is either absent or asleep. Peder believes it is his duty to stamp out Susie’s superstition “because I can see the truth and I am stronger,” even when he sees his wife’s visible joy at having participated in the rites of the church (83). When Father Williams, who is Susie’s main connection to her spiritual roots, attempts to

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<sup>91</sup> Dolan reports that marriages between Catholics and Protestants were relatively uncommon at the turn of the twentieth century and, while they were not completely forbidden, were looked upon by the church as “a threat to one’s salvation and the salvation of the children as well” (228). Catholics were allowed to marry Protestants only “for just and grave causes.” Susie’s pregnancy out of wedlock would surely have been considered such a cause (228).

maintain the church's influence over her by admonishing Peder to respect her religion and allow her access to it, Peder tells the priest that his only obligation to Susie is to use his common sense to ensure that they get along (80-1). In private, Peder insults Father Williams before Susie at every opportunity, and, finally, in a fit of anger, tells the priest that if he does not stop interfering in the couple's relationship, "I shall have to kill you, grind you under my heel as I would a venomous snake. I tell you now, once and for all, that your God is not my God!" (283).

Peder's refusal to support the ritual practices of either Lutheranism or Catholicism means that his wife and mother come to view his son's spiritual welfare as their responsibility. Because they come from two different religious traditions with a history of mutual suspicion and misunderstanding, however, neither woman can discuss the issue with the other. Susie worries about the fate of her child's soul in a Protestant household, going so far as to place a Catholic medal around the infant's neck (100-1) and to make the sign of the cross under his back whenever she gives him to Beret or takes him from her arms (73).<sup>92</sup> Beret worries equally about the fate of her grandson's soul, especially about the possibility that Petie could be baptized in the Catholic Church or even die without undergoing the rite of baptism at all. She therefore begins nagging Peder about having Petie baptized in the Lutheran church, warning him of the consequences of neglecting his son's spiritual welfare (84). Peder continually puts the baptism off, ostensibly because he dislikes Reverend Gabrielson, the Lutheran minister, and because of the greater problem he fears he would have with Susie over the ritual; fundamentally,

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<sup>92</sup> Dolan reports that the Catholic Church and much of Catholic fiction of the period stressed the especial peril of mixed marriages to the souls of children (*The American Catholic Experience* 228).

however, Peder's postponement of the baptism stems from the fact that he simply does not believe it matters.

When she becomes convinced that Peder's evasion will eventually lead Susie to have the child baptized into the Catholic faith, Beret takes it upon herself to have him baptized in secret. Just as Peder was baptized by a beloved friend of the family when Beret and Per Hansa were in extreme circumstances and had no access to a minister, Beret calls upon her friend Sörine to baptize Petie while Peder and Susie are away from home, telling her that the misfortune of being baptized into Roman Catholicism "is not going to happen to any of mine as long as I am on my feet and in my right mind!" (88). Beret prepares Peder's baptismal gown, now yellowed with age, spreads a white cloth on the table and sets a bowl of water on it, then places the hymn book in Sörine's hands, telling her "You say what the book tells you to say. You know how it is to be done. The name is Peder Emmanuel" (89). The narrative then tells us:

Sörine lowered her eyes to the book and in an unsteady voice spoke the words of the baptismal ritual, letting handfuls of water drip on the head of the child, saying solemnly: "Peder Emmanuel, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." As she did so her whole body trembled so violently that she feared she would fall in a faint; she hastened through the Lord's Prayer, said the Amen, and threw herself down in a chair. Her face was wet with cold perspiration.

"Praise be to God, now it is *done*. May it be pleasing in His sight!" sighed Beret. (89)

In this scene, Sörine's anxiety over taking over an office reserved for an ordained priest, as well as Beret's relief at having accomplished the baptism, suggests the degree to which rituals can exert power over their participants, creating an overwhelming sense of obligation as well as anxiety over failure to perform them according to the manner prescribed by the redemptive order. Yet Rölvaag also tells us that God "looked with favor on Beret's act of Christian solicitude, for, immediately after Petie's baptism, "a heavy mantle of clouds was cast over the entire sky [. . .] and before nightfall it was raining, quietly but with unmistakable certainty [. . .] And now, when the drought had once been broken, there came rain in abundance" (90), indicating a fundamental correspondence between the powers of ritual and the fertilizing forces of the natural world.

Meanwhile, Susie, like Beret, also suffers remorse over her failure to have her son baptized according to the rites of the Church. At one point she confesses to Father Williams that she cannot baptize her son without Peder's knowledge because he would never forgive her. "I can feel it in me," she tells him, "He just doesn't understand" (131). Yet, her conscience continues to torment her to such a degree that when her father injures himself and must be taken to town to see a doctor, Susie uses the opportunity to go to confession and to have Petie baptized by Father Williams. Father Williams, in turn, is so worried about the effects of Susie's marriage to a Protestant upon herself and her son that he offers to baptize the child with water from the River Jordan, which he collected in a silver flask while on a pilgrimage years earlier.

Rölvaag describes the Catholic ritual of baptism in detail, noting in particular the effect it has on Susie, who, having lived without the rites of the church for several months, now receives the experience with special intensity:

From the moment [Father Williams] met her in the aisle with “What do you ask of the Church?” and she had answered meekly, “The Faith,” and until she had stood by the baptismal font, it was as if step by step she had been approaching the very throne of Omnipotence. She could not have explained what happened to her and her child, because it was all so wonderful. [. . .] Here a higher power was addressing her; she was only a lost child who in humility accepted that which was given her. Her son, flesh of her flesh and blood of her own heart, she presented for holy baptism; the son that she had got in sin, committed in the frivolity of youth, she now surrendered into the hand of Omnipotence. Willingly she delivered him up, and felt at the same time a strange pain and unspeakable sweetness. (135-6)

Rölvaag’s narrative emphasizes the power of ritual to create redemptive hegemony by instilling certain values in the participant while simultaneously offering the possibility of exercising those virtues in discharging one’s obligations to the ritual order. More particularly, the ritual scene reveals what virtues were expected of the good Catholic by the devotional cult of the turn of the century. Yet Rölvaag does not simply suggest the beauty of the ritual, but he also evokes its power over the human mind, thus raising questions as to whether Susie is participating in a legitimate sacrament of initiation and redemption or whether she is being manipulated by the persuasive strategies and aesthetic

power of the ritual into accepting the authoritarian rule of the church. After the baptism, Rölvaag tells us this:

Susie stood with her child in her arms, a great effulgence enfolding her. Her child, her very flesh and blood, had been inducted into the communion of saints and had received sonship from God the Father. Now little child angels were ringing the bells of heaven in honor of the occasions. Susie stood in the doorway of the church; she had forgotten all about the others. In the western sky shone the bright afterglow of a great sun that had just now sunk into the prairie . . . Out there were all the fairy angels . . . now they were hurrying home, back to their sweet mysteries! (135-6)

Here again, Rölvaag presents Susie's Catholicism as somewhat childish and sentimental, yet he tells us that after the baptism, Susie's father is miraculously healed of his injury, just as after Beret's baptismal rite, a fertilizing rain ended the drought.

The issue of the baptism lies dormant until, later in the novel, it comes to life again in the ritual of confession, when Beret, having suffered a hip fracture, lies dying of heart failure and wishes to confess her sin against Susie before receiving Communion for the last time. Now realizing the wrongness of her actions in robbing Susie of the right to baptize her own child, she feels she must tell her the truth before departing this world. After Beret's death, Susie accuses her to Peder of having tried to steal her son's soul, to which Peder's cries out, "Can't you understand that she *had* to do it? That her God demanded it of her? . . . That she had to do it to satisfy him?" (262), indicating the degree to which the redemptive hegemony created by ritual has imparted to Beret the fear of



failing to sustain it. Susie, on the other hand, has done the same thing that Beret did, but remains silent about her own machinations.

Once the truth has been confessed and Beret has been removed from the scene, it would seem that the matter of Petie's baptism would be closed for good. But Peder's error in believing that the ritual did not matter comes back to haunt him. When Peder decides to fulfill his dreams of running for political office by entering the election for county commissioner, he finds himself running against Tom McDougall, an Irish Catholic candidate. Susie assures Peder that she is working to convince her Irish family and friends to vote for Peder, but he hears rumors that the Dohenys consider an Irish Catholic vote for a Norwegian Lutheran a sacrilege. When Peder returns from speaking on behalf of the Republican Party on the campaign circuit, he learns that his opponent will be giving a speech about Peder himself, and that although Susie knew about it, she has not told him. Peder attends the meeting so that he can defend himself against McDougall's criticism, only to stand in disbelief as he listens to McDougall describe Peder as a cold-hearted free-thinking Norwegian Lutheran who cruelly refused to allow his wife to have their child baptized, forcing her to have him baptized secretly (333). Peder learns of his wife's duplicity for the first time at a public event meant to humiliate him. The sacred ritual of human redemption has thus been used to exclude Peder from the redemptive order to which he so desperately wants to belong.

Peder, overcome with nausea at the import of what he hears, returns home. The ritual and the conditions under which the baptism has been performed have brought the fundamental differences between Peder and Susie to a crisis point. In a cold rage, Peder enters Susie's room, rips her crucifix off the wall, smashes her font of holy water, and

grinds the beads of her rosary, which he calls “the root of all the evil,” under his foot (337). The next morning, Peder discovers that Susie has taken Petie and returned to the Doheny farm. Peder is now left alone, bereft of mother, wife, and child.

The failure of the marriage between the freethinking Norwegian Lutheran and the orthodox Irish Catholic over a ritual of initiation and redemption says much about the enmeshment of religion and ethnicity in America’s history. The crisis in the Holm family over a ritual that will mark the identity of the next generation is ultimately a crisis of identity and loyalty for each of its members. In their moves to determine who the child will be, whether Catholic, Protestant, or common sense Freethinker, they all attempt to define their own identities by discharging their obligations to a redemptive order they perceive to be salvific. Because religion and ethnicity are so intertwined in America, especially in *immigrant* America, religious questions inevitably call up ethnic questions and the degree to which personal identity and the sense of redemption in America is related to membership within one’s ethnic community. Even more important for the American projects of civil liberty and freedom of religion, Rölvaag forces us to consider how far it is truly possible to maintain unity in diversity, and at what spiritual and cultural cost. As Paul Reigstad suggests, “That Peder can so easily reject his heritage to marry his Irish-Catholic sweetheart, Susie Doheny, attests to the failure of church, school and state to insist upon the special characteristics of immigrant cultures” (135). Reverend Kaldahl, who replaces Reverend Gabrielson as the pastor of the Lutheran church in Spring Creek, also warns that America’s tendency to dissolve ethnic difference will inevitably result in its becoming “the most impoverished land spiritually on the face of the earth” (*Their Fathers’ God* 210). At the end of *Their Fathers’ God*, Rölvaag presents Peder, who has

attempted to adopt a redemptive order that ignores both religion and ethnicity, as the very embodiment of such impoverishment.

The novel also speaks to gender concerns as Peder's pursuit of identity through prominence in the American civic order contrasts sharply with the adherence of his mother and his wife to ritual practice within the Christian redemptive order. Peder sees religion as a feminine project that has confined him for most of his life, an attitude he most cruelly evinces in grinding Susie's rosary to pieces. Peder thus seeks to throw off "feminine" religion in favor of recognition and power in the "masculine" world of politics. He is free to seek such power because he is male, whereas Beret and Susie have no such empowerment outside the ritual order. Because they are able to gain the experience of personal empowerment through their fulfillment of the obligations imposed by their respective rituals, Beret and Susie confirm Boudewijnse's theory that ritual can indeed provide an alternative to the pursuit of identity through social prestige. Finally, while Peder assumes that his masculine common sense is superior to the mystical superstitions of the women in the household, they have access, despite all of its human distortions, to a transcendent order that invests the drudgery of their life on the prairie with luminescence.

What may be most striking about Rölvaag's presentation, however, is his ability to capture the problem of ritual, particularly in pluralistic societies like America. Rölvaag makes apparent Beret and Susie's narrow-minded allegiance to the demands of their religion. Each sins against the other out of a blind belief that her failure to appease those demands will result in either Petie's or her own damnation. Susie's spiritual advisor, Father Williams, is almost exasperatingly kind in the face of Peder's rebukes, yet he

inhabits an office from which “since the day of creation God’s wind and gracious sunshine must have been shut out” (281). Beret’s commitment to the rituals of her Lutheran faith does not save her from hubris in asserting the supremacy of her own rituals over those of the child’s mother. Susie’s devotions to the Virgin Mary do not save her from a failure of courage and from deceit. Viewed from this perspective, ritual seems to do nothing more than promote spiritual blindness and ethnic division. Yet, both baptisms somehow minister to “the hidden life of the heart” (210). Both Susie and Beret experience spiritual empowerment through the exercise of ritual; afterward, a fertilizing rain falls on the parched earth, and the lame walk. In comparison, Peder’s commonsense life seems sterile, a sojourn into what Reverend Kaldahl calls “the perfect democracy of barrenness.” Rölvaag offers an alternative to both extremes, perhaps, in the figure of Nikoline Johansen, a Norwegian girl who visits the prairie for a while. In contrast to Susie’s childlike helplessness and emotional extremes, Nikoline has a level head and a full heart and is able to distinguish clearly between illusion and reality. She also receives spiritual sustenance from the cultural riches of her heritage without being the victim of religious dogma. Because she represents the fulfillment of both sides of Peder’s nature, the head and the heart, Peder feels an intense attraction to her. Significantly, however, Nikoline returns to Norway because she finds life in America unsupportive of those who seek to blend the two modes of existence.

Rölvaag wrote *Their Fathers’ God* at the end of his life, during a period of illness and despair. For that reason, Reigstad claims the novel shows his bitterness and impatience with human folly (138). Rölvaag intended to write a fourth novel in which he brought Peder back to his heritage and the fulfillment of his destiny. In its

indeterminacy, what proved to be his last novel perhaps speaks more eloquently to the problem of ritual practice in a modernizing and pluralistic society and to more fundamental issues of ethnicity, religion, and identity in American life.

At the heart of the novel's conflict is a double bind with regard to religious signification that continues to the present day: the need for common rituals and symbols to nourish the American community even as they intensify and even create divisions within that community. In its examination of the paradoxical soaring of the soul within the confines of a ritual order than can fetter it in ordinary life, *Their Fathers' God* confronts head-on the difficulties of living with religious ritual in a multicultural society while also suggesting that there is poverty in living without it. And as to whether the cult of the nation state can take its place, whether the cheer for national unity can replace the chant of the *imam*, Rölvaag makes plain the spiritual insufficiency of the cult of American civil religion to provide adequately for the soul's often painful and lonely peregrinations into, through, and out of this life. Rölvaag's novel encapsulates the very dilemma voiced by William James to a modernist colleague who criticized him for his focus on the non-rational aspects of religious belief: "Your bogey is superstition; my bogey is desiccation" (*Letter to L.T. Hodhouse*, 12 August, 1904).

In their protagonists' quests for identity in America, all of these novels in some way manifest the constellation of concerns and the tensions posed by the conflicting urges toward universality and ethnic difference that Timothy Smith has described as characteristic of many immigrants: Ciambelli's project to redeem Italian identity through heroic action within the larger American patriotic order, while also fostering Italian nationalism, reflects these tensions. Samuel Cohen's identity crisis springs largely from a

longing to identify with a universal brotherhood coupled with an equally powerful sense of his ethnic particularity brought about by the psychological challenges imposed by Christian hypocrisy and anti-Semitism, and his uprooting through immigration. The resulting intensification of his theological reflection causes him, in turn, to refuse total identification with either Judaism or Christianity, while still striving to fulfill their common ethical demands. Similarly, Peder Holm's struggle simultaneously to dissolve and maintain the boundaries of his ethno-religious identity stems from his confrontation with the conflicting and oppressive obligations imposed by his mother's Norwegian Lutheranism and his wife's Irish Catholicism as he experiences them beneath his overarching vision of redemption from ethnic particularity through absorption into the super-identity of the American citizen.

The importance of these novels lies not only in their unflinching presentations of the problem of immigrant identity but also in their ability to resurrect the archetypal patterns and instabilities at the core of American identity in general. As William Boelhower has observed, "the quest for an identity and the search for a *patria* go hand in hand" (78). Since Americans are not rooted in the land in which they were born, they no longer possess the old categories of nature and geography that were once used to determine identity (19), and are thus privileged, or doomed, to search for their identity in a country that is always *yet to be*. Therefore, these immigrant protagonists—liminal beings who continually search for reintegration into a community that does not exist—stand for *all* Americans. Their unresolved fates represent not only *immigrant* liminality, but *American* liminality as well: Enrico Arnoldi distinguishes himself before the American public as a military hero, yet curiously remains outside American territory at

the novel's end. Samuel Cohen, despite his reconciliation with his father, is not completely reconciled to Judaism or Christianity and remains outside the boundaries of either community. The reader last sees Peder Holm leaving his house to enter the undifferentiated space of the American prairie—an outsider to all of its existing communities. Thus, as did Boelhower, these novels suggest that the true answer to Crevecoeur's question of "What is an American?" may indeed be "a questioning gaze" (77). Finally, in their insistence upon religious ritual as a central frame for ethnic semiosis, these novels exhume the sign of ethnic spirituality from its Native American burial ground to suggest, as did the ambivalence of nativist secret societies toward "ethnic" ritual practice, that "American" religion cannot be divorced from "ethnic" religion. More importantly, perhaps, in the light of current events in the Middle East, they assert that, despite the national project of salvation through ethnic dissolution in the waters of the national font, ethnic religious signification is in fact central to American religious identity. If such is the case, the choice to have an *imam* face the East and chant a blessing beneath the American flag at the Columbiad was indeed inspired.

## Conclusion

In “The Place of Ritual in Our Time,” Susan Mizruchi states, “it may be that for our time religion will be the grand ‘multicultural scene,’ the great pluralist case” (467). The novels of the immigrant writers chosen for this study, in which ethnic religious practice is used to raise multiple concerns regarding religion, ethnicity, and plurality in America, clearly support Mizruchi’s claim. If for no other reason, these novels deserve attention for bringing the great pluralist case of religion before the American public and for revealing the degree to which questions of ethnicity are bound up with the desire to maintain the boundary between the Sacred and the Profane in American life. However, while their depictions of ethnic ritual are particularly effective hieroglyphs of the grand multicultural scene, their importance extends beyond that, anticipating the work of modern writers and inviting the contemporary reader to consider significant historical, cultural, and theological questions.

First, in their continual portrayal of its use in religious signification, these writers offer the ethnic body as a legitimate medium for the construction of spiritual meaning in America. The Italian religious processions of Ciambelli and Forgione, for example, wherein bodies considered outside the boundaries of mainstream religious expression become the central means of demarcating a path of reverence, prompt us to reconsider our assumptions about the place of ethnic bodies in the American socio-economic order and our historically conditioned theological assumptions about the body in American religious practice. Furthermore, these novels, in which human life is sanctified through contact with the dumb ministers of the physical world— bread, wine, phylacteries, rosary beads, an ancestor’s grave, or a bowl of water on a white cloth—offer a counter-vision of



materiality in which body and spirit are placed on one continuum, a vision that serves as a literary attempt to overcome the American split between the material and the spiritual which has resulted in the exploitation of the physical world for profit that has been characteristic of our economic practice both at home and abroad. If the material world, including the human body, is potentially sacramental, then it cannot be so easily reduced to articles for purchase and consumption or machinery for labor (as is currently the case with Latino immigrants) without regard for the symbolic and spiritual capital it possesses.<sup>93</sup>

Written within a few years of the massacre at Wounded Knee and the Kishinev pogrom, however, these novels also disturb us with visions of the sacrifice of ethnic bodies, whether through religious suicide, as is the case in Ezra Brudno's *The Fugitive*, or through shame and alienation, as is depicted in Cahan's *David Levinsky*. Brudno's fixation on the Blood Libel and his sanguinary dream sequence, with its depiction of the martyrdom of Jewish bodies in response to Christian violence, anticipate later novels like Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer*, which also uses the Jewish body in connection with the myth of the Blood Libel and ritual sacrifice to inquire into similar questions of ethnicity, faith, and human dignity. Furthermore, Brudno's novel anticipates the horrors of the Holocaust as well as the modern-day spectacle of Islamic suicide bombers, whose fragmented bodies testify to the consequences of the power struggles between East and West, and the confusion regarding the boundaries between the Sacred and the Profane in the modern world.

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<sup>93</sup> A similar idea can be seen in the film *El Norte* (1983), directed by Gregory Nava, in which Guatemalan bodies are shown engaged in mourning rituals of great dignity only to be exploited later as machines in the American workplace.

As their immigrant protagonists struggle with the place of their ethnicity within Anglo-American territory, these novels further mirror dilemmas of the globalizing present, when ethnic communities more and more often live outside of national and geographical boundaries and the problem of asserting transnational communal identities has become more urgent (Jacobson 17). Their repeated use of religious ritual as a marker of ethnic boundaries among people who have been displaced from their homelands reveals a pattern similar to that of the present in which, “with social space no longer fixed and geographic, other boundary markers come to the fore” (19). At the same time, as in Rölvaag’s *Giants in the Earth*, in which landmarks and boundaries figure so prominently in ethnic competition for a place in America, they prompt us to consider our current fixation on territorial boundaries and their relationship to the ethnicity of those who would cross them. As Joseph Nevins suggests, now that the old racial taxonomies that were once used to distinguish insiders and outsiders have become politically unacceptable, American anxieties over the racial characteristics of intruding aliens have now been buried in a coded rhetoric devoted to an emphasis on the discursive categories of territorial boundaries and the “illegal” (96). In painting the struggle of displaced immigrants who quest for a place in American sacred space, the fiction of immigrant writers invites us to look upon those “trespassers” among us in a more compassionate light.

The controversies over the purity of ethnic language in these novels also call to mind current efforts to preserve ethnic purity through linguistic purity, such as those of the *Academie Francaise* intended to stop the infiltration of English words into the French language and those of Americans who wish to define American identity by excluding

Spanish from its national linguistic base. In addition, the preoccupation of immigrant writers with the religious significance of particular languages and their importance to the identity of the ethnic community anticipates modern novels like John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), in which a young Arab American devotes himself to the study of the Quran in Arabic, a language which he considers the zenith of religious expression and which must be preserved at all costs from the sully effects of translations into English—the language of infidels (101-7). As they probe the relationship between religious language and ethno-religious discrimination, these novels also bring up the problem of the ways in which ritualized language is perceived in the mind of the American public, as television news reports introduce continuing accounts of Muslim violence with haunting melismas from the minaret, tactics that play upon American associations of ritual with the primitive and with the effort to suppress human freedom.

Mizruchi has argued that the Enlightenment project to rationalize religion resulted in an increasing disregard for the alternative and indeterminate language of ritual in which logically distinct categories and taxonomic indicators invade and overlap one another (489). Such blurring of rational thought was, and still is, deemed dangerous to the project of creating a just and equal political order based on the values of individual freedom and conscience. These novels lay bare this problem. Yet, through their use of ritual as an *alternative* language that empowers the oppressed and expresses the inexpressible, they also reflect Wittgenstein's assertion that certain levels of religious discourse express truths that cannot be expressed at any other level (32), making us pause to consider what human insights might be lost if ritual were eventually removed from the

religious landscape of an increasingly secular and rationalized world in the interest of political stability.

Such quandaries inevitably bring up the problem of ritual's use of aesthetics to influence and persuade, an issue that the novels of Kang, Yeziarska, Steiner, and Rölvaag probe at some length. While Kang and Yeziarska suggest the moral consequences of splitting off aesthetics from morality, Steiner and Rölvaag warn of the consequences of giving up one's powers of moral discernment under the spell of ritual's aesthetic strategies of persuasion. In addition, all four writers give us insight into the ways ethnic ritual can be perceived according to prevailing notions of aesthetic value, allowing us to ponder the ways in which assumptions akin to those of Captain Bourke regarding the aesthetic and the moral in ethnic religious signification might still underlie the American vision of such phenomena as Islamic prayer services and parades of self-flagellation.

Herman Melville, who traveled the world and witnessed exotic rituals in the South Seas, later wrote in *Billy Budd*, a story revolving around military ritual, "With mankind, forms, measured forms, are everything and that is the import couched in the story of Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the denizens of the wood" (501). In their use of ritual, these immigrant travelers to America, like the world traveler Melville before them, address the interrelationship between the moral and the aesthetic through the larger philosophical problem of ordering life by means of human forms, showing us on the one hand the human need for rituals and their symbols of transcendence to sustain and vitalize individual and collective life, as well as the dangers of being led by claims that "strong men, thinking men, can get along without symbols if necessary" (Tobenkin, *God of Might* 64). On the other hand, they expose the harrowing personal consequences (as in *Their*

*Fathers' God*, for example) of attempting to legislate *whose* symbols should represent the whole in a pluralistic society.

In their focus on ritual and the symbolic life in connection with aesthetics and morality, the work of immigrant writers makes an interesting counterpart to that of the modernist writers beneath whose literary shadow they took their place. At the same time that modernists like Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and T.S. Eliot were probing the capacity of art to compensate for the supposed death of religious ritual and symbols in the West, immigrant writers were struggling to articulate and interpret the appropriate relationship of those rituals and symbols to groups for whom they were still very much alive.<sup>94</sup> Both groups of writers saw the role of the artist as similar to that of the priest, although they ministered to different congregations and, perhaps, had different conceptions of their duties. In comparison to their immigrant counterparts, the modernists assumed a more introverted and contemplative stance, fulfilling their priesthood through a vertical relationship with their artistic muse which they, in turn, expressed in complex forms created for an international audience of the elite who had eyes to see and ears to hear. Immigrant writers, however, coming from social orders that stressed group consciousness, appear to have envisioned their priestly duty as arising out of their relationship with their ethnic groups, and thus focused on the task of defending and dignifying their experience, both to themselves and to outsiders, articulating their fears, and mirroring the particular pain of their collective soul's journey in America.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Eliot's later turn to the rituals of Anglicanism suggests that, along with some of the immigrant writers discussed, he found a depth of experience in religious ritual that he did not experience in art per se.

<sup>95</sup> Of all the immigrant writers, Younghill Kang seems to have been closest to the modernists in his awareness of himself as an individual artist. Perhaps, through his devotion to both Eastern and Western learning and his association with Thomas Wolfe, Kang absorbed more of the currents of modernism than

Ultimately, however, both modernists and immigrant writers sought to address the problem of forms, whether aesthetic or religious, and the role of those forms in relationship to the modern experience of dislocation, whether physical, religious, or philosophical. Both groups recognized, as Melville did, that while these collective forms, particularly religious forms, may be necessary to impose order on experience and to save us denizens of the wood from spiritual and epistemological chaos, as human constructions they are indeed imperfect and, when rigidly imposed, can sometimes contribute to the tragic sacrifice of what is best in humanity.

Although these novels present the performance of ritual by ethnic Others in American society, their focus on the use of ritual to overcome the immigrant's sense of liminality in the American milieu further prompts us to consider to what extent the experience of liminality may also be fundamental to American experience in general. To recall Victor Turner's theory, rites of passage involve three distinct movements—separation, liminality, and reintegration into the community. Observing traditional societies, Turner and his forerunner Van Gennep based their theories on ritual patterns within cultures that changed very slowly over time. The experience of immigrants was different, however, from that of these relatively stationary, monocultural groups. When we compare the immigration experience to a rite of passage, we find one essential ingredient to be missing: the third phase of re-incorporation. Since their former societies were no longer available to them and immigrants were hardly accepted into American society, they never truly experienced this final phase of reintegration in their rite of passage to America. Thus, as these novels indicate, most immigrants remained in the

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did some of his immigrant colleagues. Interestingly, both writers wrote about exile from home. It would be interesting to discover whatever mutual exchange may have occurred between Wolfe and Kang.

liminal state—the state of betwixt and between. Of course, as heirs of the immigration experience whose ethnic roots do not lie in the land in which they were born, *all* Americans share in the liminality of the immigrant, continually recapitulating what William Williams calls the quintessential American experience, one which has “establish[ed] a pattern that is replicated in almost every aspect of American life” (19). Americans, therefore, “unbounded by history, family, and even our own experiences [remain] always on the move, immigrating physically, socially, culturally, sexually, and/or spiritually in search of new shores of selfhood” (22). This pattern, coupled with the continual press toward the vision of the millennial future that is the legacy of Puritan culture (itself in many ways a product of the immigration experience), has doubly sealed the fate of Americans to carry a sense of being betwixt and between. Consequently, the liminal status of such immigrant protagonists as Peder Holm, Samuel Waterman, Samuel Cohen, David Levinsky, and Chungpa Han at the ends of their respective tales ironically may serve as the best indicator of their having become truly American. Since, as Oscar Handlin has suggested, immigrant history is American history, the ritual moments in these immigrant novels should not, therefore, be read simply as exotic examples of ethnic culture, or even as strategies of cultural resistance (although they often were), but as American ritual dramas enacted in order to overcome a fundamental liminality at the base of all American experience. In this respect, the immigrant rituals portrayed in these novels, deeply connected to “nostalgia in its most literal sense: [. . .] a longing to the point of sickness for return, for home” (Mizruchi 467-8), can be seen as particularly appropriate forms of American religious signification that address a culturally

unacknowledged sense of homelessness.<sup>96</sup> To acknowledge liminality as part of American experience, as these novels invite us to do, might, in turn, make the question of territorial borders today seem less pressing and the immigrant stranger who crosses them seem less like an invader and more like a brother.

Finally, these novels also bring to life a particularly important episode in America's long and problematic relationship with the "ritualized Other." As we have seen, from the beginning of America's religious history ritual has been something of an anomaly. To Protestant settlers who sought to free themselves from any vestiges of Roman Catholicism in the New World, Native American ritual, the lineaments of which failed to conform to their models of religious expression, became part of the forest to be cleared. When, in turn, later generations adopted the Puritan myth as the *American* myth, endorsing a project that involved the dislocation of the American religious self from the ritualized ethnic Other, they, in effect, completed the burial of the Native American, with his ritual, in the national religious unconscious. The resulting national religious identity could perhaps best be expressed through William Boelhower's formula for American ethnic identity— A(non-A)— with the parenthetical ritualized Other continually haunting and destabilizing American religious consciousness (77).<sup>97</sup> What began in the Puritan

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<sup>96</sup> Mizruchi locates the etymological roots of nostalgia in the words *nostos* ("return to home") and *algia* ("pain" or "sickness") (467-8).

<sup>97</sup> An interesting ambivalence in the American literary consciousness regarding ritualized Others can be seen in the work of Hawthorne and Melville. Hawthorne implicitly connects ritual with evil in the figure of Roger Chillingworth, the villain of *The Scarlet Letter*, who emerges from the woods after his Indian captivity, during which he learned obscure medical practices among a ritualized band of Others. He also practices alchemy, the procedures of which were highly ritualized. Melville, on the other hand, who had significant exposure to ritual practice in his travels in the South Pacific, includes an important scene in *Moby-Dick* in which Ishmael, a Presbyterian, worships an idol with his friend Queequeg in a room in the Spouter Inn. Much has been made of Ishmael and Queequeg as examples of the A(non-A) pairing throughout American literature. Less has been made, however, of the fact that most of the ethnic Others in these pairings also practice ritual. Queequeg is a South Sea Islander, who, like Natty Bumppo's friend



project, in turn, was intensified after the Enlightenment as religion became “exceedingly rational in its irrationality” and the interpreter of religion became the anthropologist who viewed ritual as an exotic medium for contemplation with curiosity and wonder (Mizruchi 488). Similarly, those turn-of-the-century American heirs of the Enlightenment, both Christian and Jewish, who “pictured and intended a single main line of rational development and progress,” (Marty 208) viewed the indeterminate language of immigrant ritual not as a special form of religious signification which expresses a level of truth that cannot be expressed otherwise but as a sign of religious atavism that would best be rooted out if religion itself were to endure (Douglass 22). It can be argued, then, that ritual, as part of the rejected ethnic Other, may be a shadow element within American *religious* identity, a means of religious signification that immigrant writers resurrected, along with other marginalized American literary groups like the regionalists, after its disappearance from mainstream American fiction around the time of the Civil War.<sup>98</sup> In positioning their ritual practice at the foreground of American religious experience, therefore, these novelists participate in the inauguration of a literary project to restore a lost part of America’s national religious identity.

Gary Gerstle has discussed the similarity of current fears of the religious practice of aliens to other episodes in American history, arguing that “we are once again living in an intensely religious age more akin to the nineteenth century than to the twentieth, and [ . . . ] in this current age, many Americans are once again talking about the threat that a foreign religion, in this case Islam, poses to American values, traditions, and security”

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Chingachgook, engages in ritual practice. Similarly, although Twain presents his actions in a satirical light, Huck Finn’s friend Jim repeatedly engages in ritual performances designed to protect him from bad luck.

<sup>98</sup> Rölvaag may have sensed this connection in choosing to locate an Indian grave on the hill behind the home of the immigrant Holm family, where so many rituals are performed.

(90). Yet the religious practice of “aliens” was part of the earliest American encounter with the New World. If, as Mizruchi argues “what you don’t know about your past, your spiritual history, is sure to get you” (486), then an encounter with the ritual performances of ethnic Others in these novels should perhaps prompt us modern readers to investigate our own complex history with regard to this figure in order to understand better the nature of the religious drama currently being played out on the international stage and to ask whether or not we might somehow, to borrow from William James, be using the “superstitious” East to carry part of the religious life of the “desiccated” West.

In their use of ritual practice, these novels offer us a portal into a lost but significant part of our own religious history and an opportunity to consider the political implications of incorporating the ritualized Other into American religious and cultural identity. At the same time, they invite us to consider the question of whether or not it is possible for a democratic, pluralistic society to achieve Mary Douglass’s vision of “a cross-cultural, pan-human pattern of symbols” that is truly redemptive and does not inevitably create an Other against whom its rituals are played out. American dedication to individual liberty and freedom of religion will always mean that religious practice cannot be legislated. For that reason, it may be that what Douglass sees as “one of the gravest, problems of our day [. . .], the lack of commitment to common symbols” (19) without the rites that *engage* us with symbols, will continue to remain a problem. If American religious culture were able to own its roots in the ritual practice of the ethnic Other, however, the mutual gazes of the modern American and the ritualized practitioner of the Middle East might be irrevocably changed.

Timothy Smith has argued that “the ethnic springs of modern American religiosity have given the national culture not a backwater of static dogmas and rituals but a many-channeled stream of conviction that mankind must become one people” (1183). These novels written by immigrants to America bring to life the human challenges, costs, and anguish involved in their struggle to follow the stream of that conviction into the common national life. These novels also show, however, that the backwater of ethnic ritual practice, stagnant though it may have appeared, could also conceal deep currents of human consolation, eddies of personal transformation, pearls of spiritual transcendence.

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